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IN THIS ISSUE

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by
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A Steve Reese Novel by
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by Walker A. Tompkins

Three rambunctious range detectives tackle Joseph Knight's Knifegash Syndicate in a gun-busting try to bring justice to the men who had murdered bold Rocky Malone and persecuted his daughter, Marcia 9

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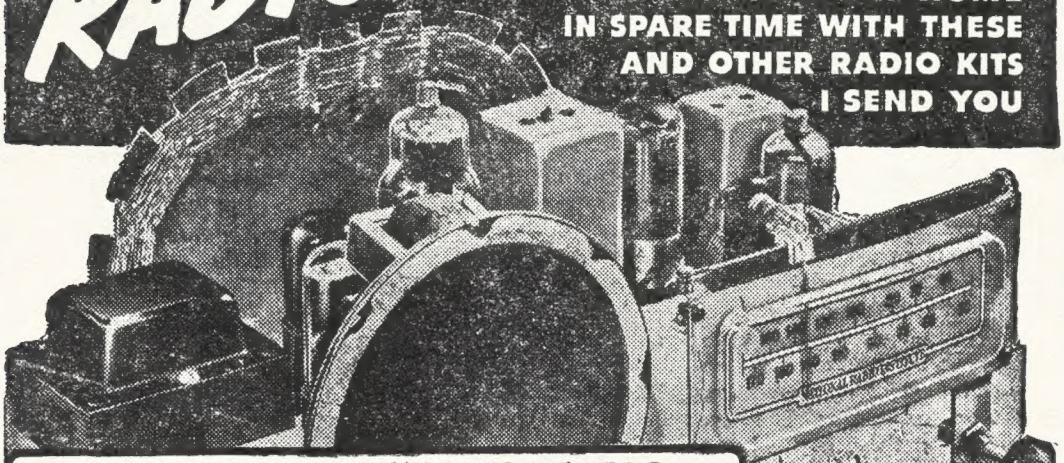

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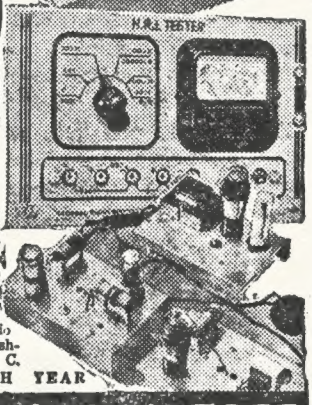

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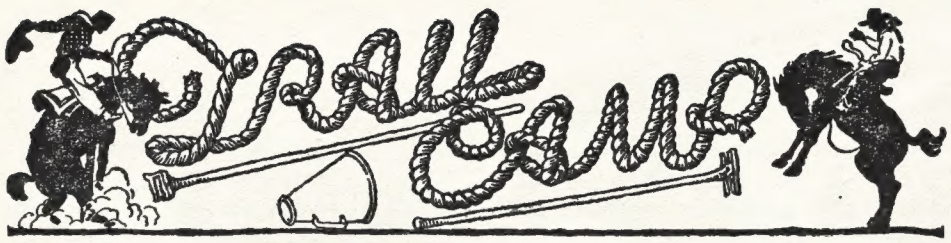

A Department for Readers Conducted by FOGHORN CLANCY

America's Most Famous Rodeo Expert and Handicapper

GREETINGS, waddies, gather round the old trail camp while we keep the old pot of coffee hot and roll a few quirlies and engage in a little palaver about things Western, mostly about cowboys and their great sport, the rodeo.

As we swing into the last turn of the backstretch of the rodeo season it's looking more and more like a great season. The cowboys are up on their toes and the race for the championship titles is plenty hot in most of the events, but there is some distance to go yet. Anything can happen and something surely will.

A fellow in the lead in the race for the season's championship title in any of the events can be likened to a contestant in the lead in any event at a single rodeo. He may look like a sure winner and all at once, when least expected, there is an upset. He is bucked off in a riding event, or misses in a timed event, and is out of the finals.

There have been quite a number of cowboys in season's championship races before now that looked like winners when they happened to receive a serious injury and were thus thrown out of the race entirely, like a horse two or three lengths in the lead that enters the homestretch of a horse race suddenly falls and instead of winning as expected, does not even finish the race! One can never tell, even up to the last rodeo of the season, just how it is all going to turn out.

Leading Title Contenders

The latest compilation of points in the Rodeo Cowboys Association point award system shows Bill Linderman away out in front for the all around championship, having already garnered 15,118 points, which shows that Bill has already won more than fifteen thousand dollars in prize money this season.

Gene Rambo is in second place with 11,190 points, Harry Tompkins is third with 10,010 points, Jim Shoulders, the present champion, is fourth with 8,470 points, and Homer Pettigrew is fifth with 8,268 points.

For the title of saddle bronc riding champion it's Bill Linderman in the lead, with 6,181 points in this event. Casey Tibbs, the present champion, is second with 4,024 points. Bill Ward is third with 3,780 points, Ross Dollarhide is fourth with 3,010 points, and Gene Pruett is fifth with 2,994 points.

For the calf roping title Don McLaughlin is leading with 6,629 points, Toots Mansfield is second with 5,998 points, Vern Castro is third with 5,402 points, Gene Rambo is fourth with 5,264 points and Royce Sewalt is fifth with 4,719 points.

Eddie Akridge is leading the field in the bareback bronc riding with 3,888 points, Wallace Brooks is second with 3,631 points, Bill Linderman is third with 2,991, Jim Shoulders is fourth with 2,904 and Bud Spealman is fifth with 2,382 points.

Bill Linderman leads the steer wrestlers with 5,936 points, Homer Pettigrew is second with 4,859 points, Dub Phillips is third with 3,898, Jack Favor is fourth with 2,487 and James Bynum is fifth with 2,382 points.

Harry Tompkins leads the bull riders with 7,685 points, Jim Shoulders is second with 5,761, Dave Masor is third with 3,302, Gerald Roberts is fourth with 3,018, and Sonny Lavender is fifth with 2,451.

John Rhodes leads the pack in the team roping, followed by Buck Sorrells, Joe Bassett, Eddie Schell, Clay Carr and Vern Castro, in order. Stan Gomez is the leader in steer roping with Clay Carr, Varn Castro, Dick Fairchild, Will Connelly and Glen Shaw stringing along close behind.

The recent Fort Smith, Arkansas, Rodeo was an excellent show and drew good crowds. The judges were Eddie Curtis and Tater Decker. Timers were Mrs. Buff Brady and Monte Reger. The announcer was Pete Logan, and the arena secretary Monte Reger. The trick riders included Mary Iler, Nancy Bragg, Buff Brady, Don Wilcox and Fay Blackstone. Specialty acts were performed by the Allens and John Lindsey. Clowns were Ken Boen, John Lindsey and Orville Mann.

The final results in calf roping were: First, Zeano Ferris; second, Whit Kenney; third, Homer Pettigrew; fourth, T. B. Porter.

Homer Pettigrew won the steer wrestling, Ken Boen was second, Jake Monroe was third and Charlie Colbert was fourth. Casey Tibbs copped the saddle bronc riding, Buster Butts was second, Vic Blackstone was third and Lee Roberts fourth.

Harry Tompkins was best man in the bull riding, Buck Rutherford was second. Billy Hand was third and Cavett Pettigrew was fourth. Jack Buschbaum was tops in bareback bronc riding, Jim Shoulders was second, Johnny Crethers was third and fourth was split between Billy Weeks and Gene Peacock.

New York Event

This fall will mark the Twenty-Fifth Annual World's Championship Rodeo in New York City, at this writing scheduled to be staged in Madison Square Garden from September 27th through October 22nd, with a total of 43 performances, which will include 26 night performances and 17 matinees. There is a posted purse of $84,000.00, to which will be added the entrance fees, which will swell the total purse to well over $100,000.00. As you are reading this some time after it is being written, the big show might be on right now.

The contest event of bareback bronc riding has a purse of $15,120.00 and added entrance fee of $20.00 for each entry. In calf roping there is a purse of $15,120.00, with an added entrance fee of $150.00.

Time was when the entrance fee in calf roping at the Garden Rodeo was little more than in the other events, but calf roping is one event in which the ropers must be experts. There were many supposed cowboys around the metropolitan district. Some

(Continued on page 122)

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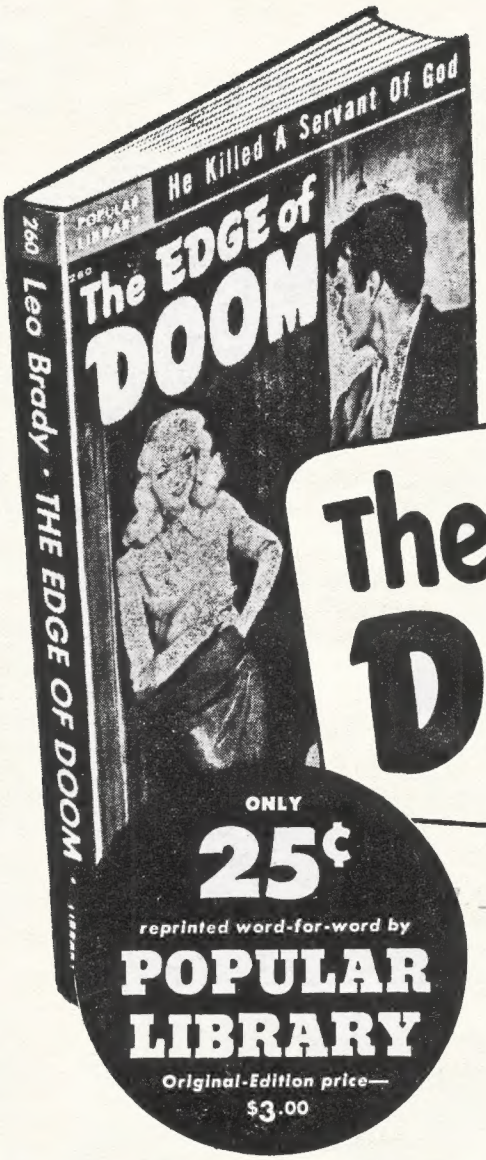

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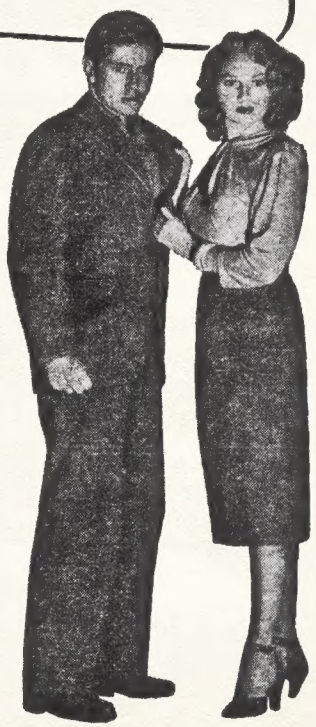

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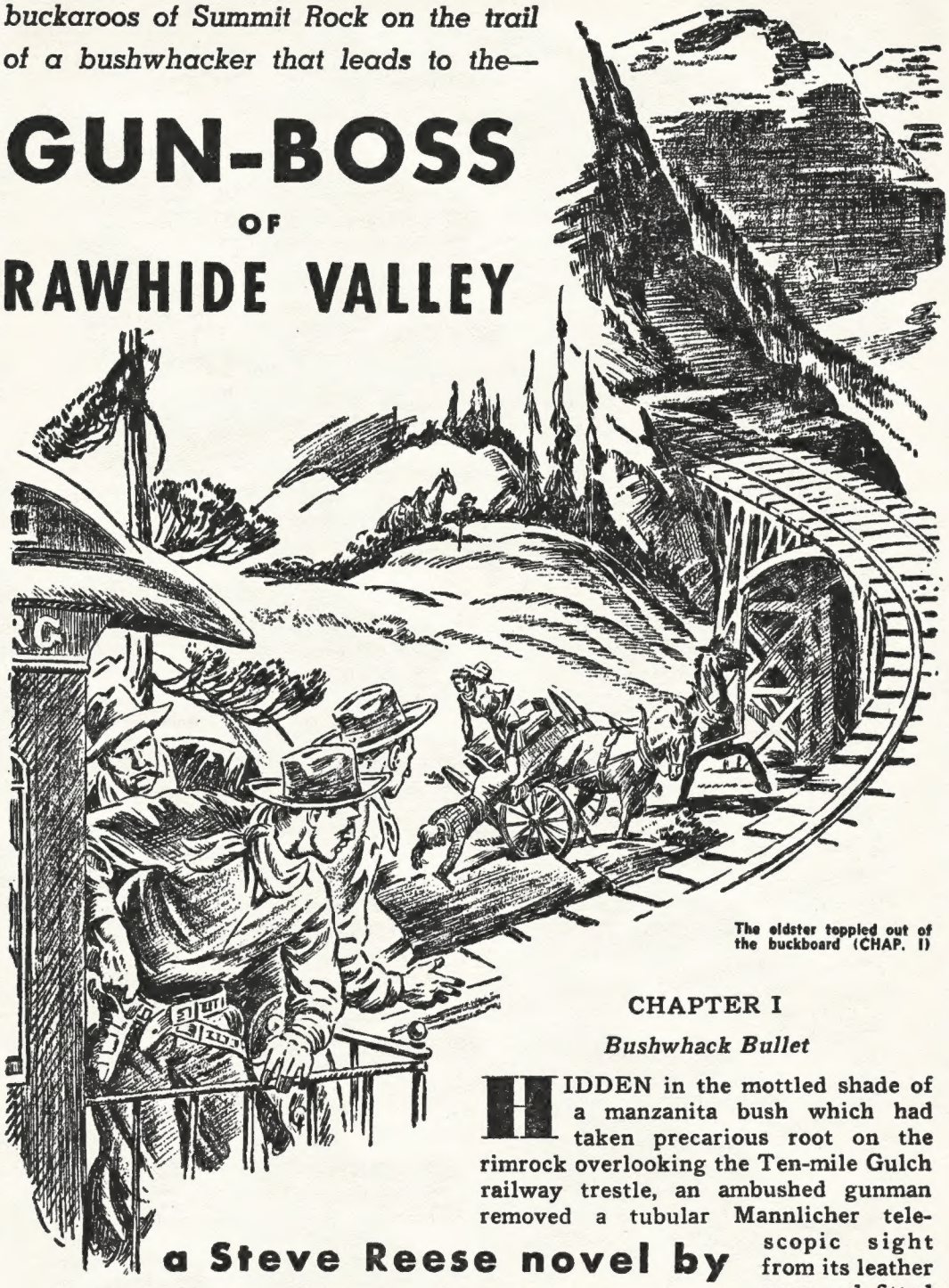


The oldster toppled out of the buckboard (CHAP. I)

a Steve Reese novel by WALKER A. TOMPKINS

CHAPTER I

Bushwhack Bullet

HIDDEN in the mottled shade of a manzanita bush which had taken precarious root on the rimrock overlooking the Ten-mile Gulch railway trestle, an ambushed gunman removed a tubular Mannlicher telescopic sight from its leather case and fitted it to the barrel

of his .30-.30 calibre Winchester rifle.

Through its four-power lenses, he had an unobstructed view of Rawhide Valley's head, narrowing down here at Ten-mile Gulch. The narrow-gauge Colorado & Rio Grande tracks here had an overhead crossing of the wagon road leading to the cowtown of Summit Rock, ten miles down the valley.

Coming from the direction of the up-valley cattle ranches, a buckboard was jouncing along the Summit Rock road, southbound, with a boiling train of dust lifting behind it to pollute the clear Colorado air.

A similar smudge, blue-black, made a feather-shaped blur above the black pines to the southeast, informing the rifleman in ambush that the weekly passenger train was approaching. The disturbing thought crossed his mind that vehicle and train might reach this spot at the same time; but he shrugged it off as of no consequence. The manzanitas would hide from the eyes of any passengers in the day coaches the identity of the man whose Winchester would shortly kill the driver of that oncoming buckboard.

Eye squinting through the telescopic sight, the drygulcher put the cross-hairs on the wagon and made his positive identification of the salt-bearded oldster who was driving the matched Morgans. "Rocky" Malone, owner of the small-tally Shamrock outfit at the head of Rawhide River. The girl in a cream-colored Stetson who was sharing the driver's seat with old Rocky was his daughter, Marcia.

"Too bad she has to see her dad cash in his chips," the ambusher muttered, levering a cartridge into the breech of the .30-30 and cushioning a cheek against the walnut stock. "But I've got to make sure Rocky don't get to that ranchers' meeting in town."

To the ambusher's ears came the faint singing of rails on the nearby trestle, and the remote chuffing of a locomotive's exhaust coming down-wind. The weekly passenger train from Denver making its run through these isolated foothills of the Rocky Mountains.

The ambusher heard his cream-marked Apaloosa gelding blow nervously, from where it waited behind a heap of boulders overlooking the railroad cut. The raveling ropes of sound from the engine's whistle, echoing across the timber above the valley, always made the gelding spooky. . . .

THE C&RG weekly local snaked its way out of the pines. The engineer reduced speed as he approached the high trestle at Ten-mile Gulch. On the back platform of the last coach, three men who lined the iron railing were enjoying a smoke and the passing scenery. The three were in rangeland garb—wide-brimmed Stetsons, faded work shirts, batwing chaps and spurred Justin boots. Each wore double shell belts and holstered Colts at his flanks, each looked to be a man who could use those guns efficiently. But there the physical resemblance ended.

The central figure of the trio, whose elbows were braced on the coach's brake wheel above the draw-bar, was Stephen Reese, whose fame as field chief of the Cattlemen's Protective Association was spread throughout the West. He was a powerfully built six-footer whose black hair was beginning to show silver at the temples. Being still in his thirties, however, that only added a distinguished touch to his appearance.

His limpid black eyes which some said could read a man's innermost thoughts, always alert, now were watching the ribbon of track flow back under the train's clattering trucks. The panoramic mountain scenery presented a striking picture of frontier grandeur with each passing telegraph pole.

Once Reese had known unqualified

success as a lieutenant of police in St. Louis, but a longing for adventure had led him to answer the call of the wilder West, since which time he had gone on to further success with the CPA—and far greater renown. A well-educated man, his appearance was more that of a professional man—a surgeon, a lawyer, a college professor—than that of a man-

STEVE REESE

hunter. It was this which had inspired his two chief aides and constant companions of the trail to dub him "Doc," a nickname eminently fitting.

Those two aides were with him now —Hank Ball, and "Dusty" Trail. Back in CPA headquarters in Texas, the Association president, Colonel Beauvine, would shrug all worry from his shoulders when he sent those three out into the field, no matter how difficult or dangerous the assignment.

At first glance, Reese's two lieutenants would never have been taken for anything except ordinary cowhands. Nor did they ever advertise their calling by blatantly displaying shiny badges. Instead, their badges were kept well-hidden in secret pockets in their boots until such time as it became necessary to show them. Even though both operatives wore the cowhand look, however, otherwise they were as different as it was possible for two men to be.

Dusty Trail was on the fleshy side, even to displaying a paunch over which his gun harness was tightly buckled. Well-padded jowls gave an insouciant, lazy look to his moon-round face with its baby-blue eyes which some would have called myopic—and made the mistake of their lives. A fuming stogie, as often unlighted as not, perpetually adorned his thick, humorous lips.

Dusty was an affable young fellow whose roly-poly physique made him seem a little sluggish, but in his case appearances were certainly deceiving. For under what might have been believed to be excess fat were muscles like coiled metal springs. His pudgy-looking hands were capable of dazzling speed and accuracy when he had occasion to unlimber his six-guns. And his eyes actually were so keen that his partners declared he could count the buttons on a victim's apparel, with his rifle sights lined on him at farthest gun range.

Hank Ball, Dusty's closest friend, and co-worker, who now stood at Reese's left, was a rugged, deep-chested young giant with brick-red hair and twinkling blue eyes. He was vibrant with bubbling energy and irrepressible devilment. As strikingly handsome as Reese himself, Hank Ball had an eye for a pretty girl, and it was seldom one of them ever passed him by.

But always his interest was fleeting, for when the chips were down he acknowledged that life for him did not

mean pretty girls, after all. It meant adventure—and Steve Reese and Dusty Trail. Still, during the years he had worked behind a CPA badge he had left many an admiring and disappointed female throughout the West.

ACCORDING to Dusty, Hank Ball could spot a pretty girl as far off as a deer rifle could shoot. The grinning redhead himself proved that now as the C&RG reached the high-stilted trestle.

Pointing off up the valley which the bridge spanned at this narrow point Hank announced:

"They sure grow mightly purty fillies here in the Rockies. Look a-comin', boys! Makes me kind of wish we wasn't headin' on a fishin' expedition like we are. I'll lay odds there won't be any girls like that one where we're goin'!"

Reese fanned a cloud of Dusty's malodorous stogie smoke from his eyes to stare down into the canyon. Below the trestle an old man and a beautiful blonde girl were driving along the ribbon of wagon road in a buckboard.

As the train rumbled overhead, the girl lifted a hand to return Hank's halloo from the rear platform of the coach. Even at this height they could see the white flash of her smile, and see her lips move in making some comment to the graybeard at her side.

At this precise moment, the flatted crack of a rifle shot sounded above the roar of the train on the elevated trestle and the snorting of the locomotive as it started up the long grade leading westward out of Rawhide Valley.

The three men on the coach platform were watching the two people in the buckboard as the vehicle passed into the shadow of the railroad trestle. And before their horror-struck gaze they saw the girl's long-whiskered companion suddenly stand erect and clutch at his chest with clawing fingers which had dropped the leather ribbons over the single-trees. As the train passed directly overhead, the oldster toppled sideways out of the moving buckboard, to fall under the wheels.

The girl's scream was only a thin wail above the magnified rumble of the train leaving the trestle to start the upward grade. Then the buckboard passed out of sight under the bridge, but not before the horrified men had seen the driver's sprawled body across the ruts of the wagon road.

Steve Reese's highly-trained instincts as a lawman were working with grooved precision now, causing him to jerk his eyes away from the body of the slain man and swing toward the west rim of the gulch. The gunshot had come from that direction.

The CPA field chief was in time to see a spurt of gunsmoke thinning in the air currents, near a red-barked manzanita bush which furred the brink of the cliff. Swiftly the train's forward progress blotted out the location of the ambusher, but not before an enduring photographic image of the spot had been made on Reese's brain.

"Hey! That old man was gunned down before our eyes!" Dusty was the first to shake off the shock of the gruesome thing they had witnessed. "We got to stop this train and investigate—"

Hank Ball yelled like a Comanche as the train hurtled past a rocky slope. Picketed behind those boulders was an Apaloosa horse, with a cream-colored underbarrel, undoubtedly the ambush gunhawk's waiting mount!

Reese lost valuable moments clawing at the rusty knob of the coach door as he fought to get inside the car and grab the cord which would signal the hoghead in the engine cab to stop the train. When he finally got the warped door open, it was to find the aisle blocked by the portly train conductor, heading for the rear platform and a sniff of fresh air.

"Stop the train!" Reese shouted, frantic urgency in his voice. "We just saw a killing on the road under that trestle! If we can get black there in time we can catch the bushwhacker red-handed."

The railroader stared at the law badge which his passenger was holding in his

palm, but shook his head.

"Impossible, sir," the shocked conductor apologized. "The main line comin' down the west grade has got to be clear for the Rocky Mountain Express. We only got eight minutes to reach the sidin' at Mile-High Wells as it is. Otherwise the express would run head-on into us, comin' down-grade."

Reese and his two lieutenants groaned, realizing the impossibility of stopping this train short of its siding. To do so would be to invite a ghastly pile-up when the fast express came down the single track, east-bound.

PUSHING Hank and Dusty back out on the platform, Reese said hoarsely:

"We'll jump off at the siding, boys, and hoof it back to that trestle. We owe that much to the girl we saw. For all we know she may be at that bushwhacker's mercy right now!"

Precisely six minutes later the westbound local was shunted off the main line track at the Mile-High water tanks and ground to a stop. The three CPA men had hardly swung down the steps of the coach to reach the cinder apron between the siding and the main tracks when the narrow gauge locomotive hauling the express train to Denver came in view up the grade. It roared past them with a rush of steam, the smell of hot lubricating oil, and burning brake shoes.

Because of the extreme gradiant of these tracks leading into Rawhide Valley, though, the Denver express was traveling at cautious speed, brakes dragging every wheel in the train. There was no time to talk this over. Reese and his aides made their snap decision simultaneously. They would hook a ride back to Ten-mile Gulch on this slow-moving train.

Reese, wise to the danger of being thrown under the trucks even with the train moving at less than fifteen miles

Suddenly the range baron lashed his hand forward to quirt the young ranchman (CHAP. IV)

per hour, raced alongside the track and caught a grab rail on the front end of a passenger coach. Momentum slammed his body around hard as his feet got a purchase on the protruding steps.

With wind whipping his Stetson off to tug at his throat by its rawhide chinstrap, Reese looked behind him. Dusty had jumped aboard the following car, while Hank Ball had managed to grab a handrail on the last coach.

Now that the die was cast, Reese had a moment, wondering into what dangerous situation they were about to ram their horns. Jumping off this train when it reached the trestle might result in death or a broken leg for each or all three of them. For all they knew, they might face the blazing guns of the mysterious killer whose horse they had spotted back in the rocks.

But they had seen death strike down an old man, without a chance to shoot back. And all three of the Cattle Association detectives carried a mental picture of that beautiful girl in the buckboard who even now might be the killer's second victim.

Whatever the personal risks involved, for men of their ilk there could be no other thing to do but go on.

CHAPTER II

Range War

DOWN on her knees in the thick dust of the Summit Rock wagon road below the C&RG trestle, Marcia Malone cradled her father's head on her lap and sobbed softly, her brain still struggling along the black tunnel of shock which this sudden and unexpected disaster had brought.

Old Rocky was dead. The ambush shot had killed him instantly, so that he had not felt the crushing weight of the wagon wheels passing over his midriff. A .30-30 bullet had struck Marcia's father in the right temple and passed completely through the skull.

Fifty yards down the road, on the far side of the derricklike piers which supported the railroad bridge, the Morgans were grazing at the roadside bluestem, still hitched to the wagon. Marcia had leaped from it to race back to her father's side before the team had come to a halt, its lines dragging under the wagon tongue.

A railroad locomotive's shrill whistle snapped the stricken girl out of her stunned trance. She looked up. The Rocky Mountain Express was crawling around the bend at the bottom of the West Grade, to make its passage of the high trestle at reduced speed.

As she watched, her mind not yet functioning normally, she caught sight of three men leaping from the steps of three successive coaches. They landed running and sprawling on the right-of-way just short of the trestle's end.

Terror came to Marcia then, as she heard one of the men shout above the ebbing roar of the train, already vanished in the timber east of the gulch:

"I'll go down to the girl, boys! You fellows checks on that Apaloosa."

She heard one of the other men shout a reply: "The horse ain't there, Doc, but we'll have a sniff around for the killer's sign!"

Then two of the men, sunlight flashing on drawn guns, started clambering into the rocks alongside the railroad.

Hugging her dead father as if to protect him from the approach of these strangers—her dazed brain not sure but what they were old Rocky's killers—Marcia Malone watched with a morbid fascination as she saw one of the men who had dropped from the Denver express start his descent into the canyon.

The sheer rock walls here at Tenmile seemingly would have defied anything but a fly. But the big man was making his way down the trestle's crisscrossed timbers, swinging from beam

to beam, with reckless indifference for his own safety.

Not until he had reached the ground and was heading toward her did Marcia snap to her senses. Lowering her father's head to the dust, she leaped to her feet and snatched an ivory-handled Colt .32 from the scabbard at her hip.

"Stop where you are, or I'll shoot!" she threw a challenge at Steve Reese, her left hand cuffing the flat-crowned cream-colored sombrero back on her head.

Reese halted, arms lifting hat-brim-high. At close range, this girl was more strikingly beautiful than he had guessed from his dramatically brief glimpse of her from the rear end of a moving train. She wore a plum-colored blouse which did not entirely conceal the lush curves of her ripening womanhood; waist overalls clung to her shapely legs and her cowboots were of taffy-colored leather, highly polished under the veneer of dust.

"I'm a friend, ma'am," Reese called gently, opening his right hand to let her see the flash of sunlight on a silver law badge. "Stephen Reese, of the Cattlemen's Protective Association. My partners and I saw this drygulch deal from the train. Remember you waved to us as we passed overhead?"

COMMON logic told Marcia Malone that these strangers could not be connected with her father's killing. She did remember waving to them, just an instant before the ambush bullet snuffed out Rocky's life at her side. Besides that, these three men had returned to the trestle by catching a ride on the eastbound express.

Thrusting her gun back into holster, Marcia dabbed at her eyes with the bright-colored neckerchief looped about her throat, and knelt to shield her father's blood-stained head with her sombrero. When Reese's shadow fell across Rocky Malone's corpse, the girl looked up into the CPA man's eyes.

"Any idea who did this—or why?" Reese asked, reverently removing his own Stetson.

Marcia's lips quivered, but her voice was steady when she finally answered.

"The Knifegash Syndicate is back of it, of course. One of Joe Knight's gunnies. We were on our way to town where a mass meeting of the small ranchers here in the valley had been called. To discuss ways and means of protecting ourselves from the Knifegash."

Reese knelt down on the other side of the dead oldster, his heart going out to this bereaved girl.

"The old story of a big combine trying to crowd out the little spreads, is it?" he murmured. "Who are you, young lady? You say this is your father?"

She nodded, fighting hard for self-control.

"I'm Marcia Malone. My dad here—Rocky Malone—organized the valley ranches years ago, when we leased our range every summer to the big prairie outfits who needed summer graze. The president of our little association is Cliff Copeland. He owns the Twin C outfit up the valley. I—I'm engaged to marry Cliff."

Reese gave the girl a moment to get her emotions under control. He was familiar with this pattern of conflict at which she had hinted. He realized that Rocky Malone's death was just one incident in a bitter range war brewing in these foothills, with leagues of rich summer graze as the stake.

"This Joe Knight you think hired someone to kill your father—what about him, Miss Malone?" he asked.

The girl spoke through the folds of the neckerchief she held over her face.

"Knight is the—biggest cattleman this side of the Divide. Owns a dozen ranches in the eastern part of Colorado. He wants Rawhide Valley for summer graze. He's already bought out or scared out most of the small outfits. Only Cliff and my father are holding out against him. The meeting in Summit Rock today—was to decide whether to fight fire with fire and start shooting back at

Knight's riders."

The picture was clear in Reese's mind now. Rocky Malone, dangerous to the Knifegash Syndicate which Knight controlled because, despite his age, he was one of the leaders of the small-tally group, had been shot from ambush to prevent his attending Cliff Copeland's mass meeting at the county seat.

Proving that Knight was back of this cold-blooded killing might be a difficult thing. But a capricious fate had thrown Reese into a rôle of investigator here, under the most melodramatic circumstances of his long and varied career behind a star.

"Those two men up there who came with me are CPA detectives, Miss Malone," Reese said, laying a sympathetic hand on the girl's shoulder. "I am giving you my word now that we will run your father's slayer to earth. We were on our way to a holiday in the high country, but we'll take time out to track down this ambusher."

Marcia shook her head gloomily. "I can't even tell you who he is. I didn't get a glimpse of whoever shot Dad. It all happened so suddenly—"

"But we have a clue or two to go on," Reese pointed out. "My boys and I know the ambusher made his getaway on an Apaloosa gelding with heavy cream markings. We saw it from the train, stashed out in the rocks. The ambusher fired from that manzanita clump on the skyline up there. Does the description of his horse mean anything to you?"

Marcia shook her head numbly. "I—I'm too distressed even to think straight, Mr. Reese. I appreciate your offer, but it—it is only fair to warn you not to meddle with this Rawhide Valley war. There'll be lots of bloodshed. Dad wasn't the first to die without a chance, shot from ambush."

REESE got to his feet, glancing up the sheer face of the cliff. Hank Ball and Dusty Trail were picking their way along the rimrock toward the trestle, looking like ants moving against the deep blue vault of the heavens.

"Solving range mysteries is our business, Miss Malone," the field chief said soberly. "Wait here. I'll bring the buckboard."

By the time Reese had brought the buckboard back, the team shying violently as they neared the dead man, the field chief's lieutenants had reached the trestle. Hank called down from the dizzy height:

"That busky has made his getaway, Doc! No sign of the Apaloosa, but we picked up a stake and a thirty-thirty center-fire cartridge, the gunpowder still raw-smellin'."

Dusty's voice followed Hank's, his stogie bobbing between his lips:

"Plenty of sign, though, Doc. The killer crossed the tracks, headin' south. Pity we ain't got broncs so we could foller them tracks before they get cold."

Seeing that Hank and Dusty were preparing to crawl down the trestle to join them, Reese waved them to wait. He turned to the girl.

"Where do you wish us to take your father, ma'am? To town, or—"

Marcia shook her head, gesturing up the valley.

"When I was born, he buried my mother up on our Shamrock spread, Mr. Reese. I'll take Daddy back and lay him to rest with Mother. It's only ten miles."

Reese lifted the dead man and placed the mortal remains of Rocky Malone gently into the back of the buckboard, covering him with the blanket which had been used as a seat cushion.

"Could I borrow three saddle horses out at Shamrock, Miss Malone?" Reese asked. "Hank and Dusty and I should get on that killer's trail while we have daylight. A wind storm or a rain could wipe out the sign overnight."

Marcia, climbing into the wagon and picking the reins off the whipstock, nodded.

"You can have your pick of our cavvy, Mr. Reese."

The CPA field chief cupped hands to

mouth and shouted up to his waiting lieutenants perched on the dizzy edge of the narrow-gauge trestle:

"Scout around, boys, while I drive Miss Malone back to her ranch. I'll be back with three saddle horses. I reckon our fishing trip is postponed for the time being. We've drawn cards in a full-scale range war!"

CHAPTER III

Summit Rock

MALONE'S killing at the Ten-mile trestle had occurred at nine o'clock in the morning. High noon found Steve Reese riding back down the valley road alone, mounted on a Shamrock-branded line-back dun which Marcia had sobbingly told him had been the dead man's favorite saddler.

He was trailing a strawberry roan for Hank and a close-coupled bay mustang, built sturdily to carry a man of Dusty's weight. On the way back to the Malone ranch at the head of the valley, Reese had detoured to the Twin C spread, a mile off the Summit Rock road, to allow Marcia Malone to break her tragic news to the parents of Cliff Copeland, the young rancher she was going to marry.

The elder Copelands, hardy pioneers of this untamed frontier, had immediately hitched up a wagon, to accompany Reese and the girl to the Shamrock ranch and look after the funeral arrangements for old Rocky. Then Reese had headed back to the railroad.

Two miles north of the trestle, he swung off the road to follow a side coulee out of the narrowing valley. He had realized the impossibility of reaching the level of the railroad cut in the vicinity of the Ten-mile trestle.

Hank and Dusty were waiting impatiently when the field chief finally followed the rimrock up to the flowering manzanita where spouting gunsmoke had marked the site of the killer's hiding place. Quickly Reese gave them the details of the summer graze feud between the valley ranchers and Joe Knight's powerful Knifegash Cattle Syndicate.

"Well," he asked when he had finished, "what have we got to go on so far?"

Dusty handed over a shiny brass .30-30 shell, which the killer's rifle had ejected onto a slab of granite under the manzanita.

"No help there," Reese grunted, pocketing the evidence to turn over to the sheriff in Summit Rock. "Thirty-thirties are a common caliber saddle gun throughout Colorado. What else?"

Hank slashed at a manzanita overhang with his stock knife to give Reese a better view of a patch of turf and loose blow sand under the tree. Clearly imprinted there was a boot track.

"Killer squatted here," the redhead deduced, "while he was waitin' for the Malone wagon to get within range. Number twelve boot with a square toe and Coffeyville style stitching."

Reese nodded, tugging his lower lip thoughtfully.

"In other words, we're after a big man who wears expensive custom-built boots. Probably in Joe Knight's pay since no one else had a motive to want Rocky Malone killed. According to his daughter, old Rocky didn't have an enemy in the world, outside of the Knifegash combine."

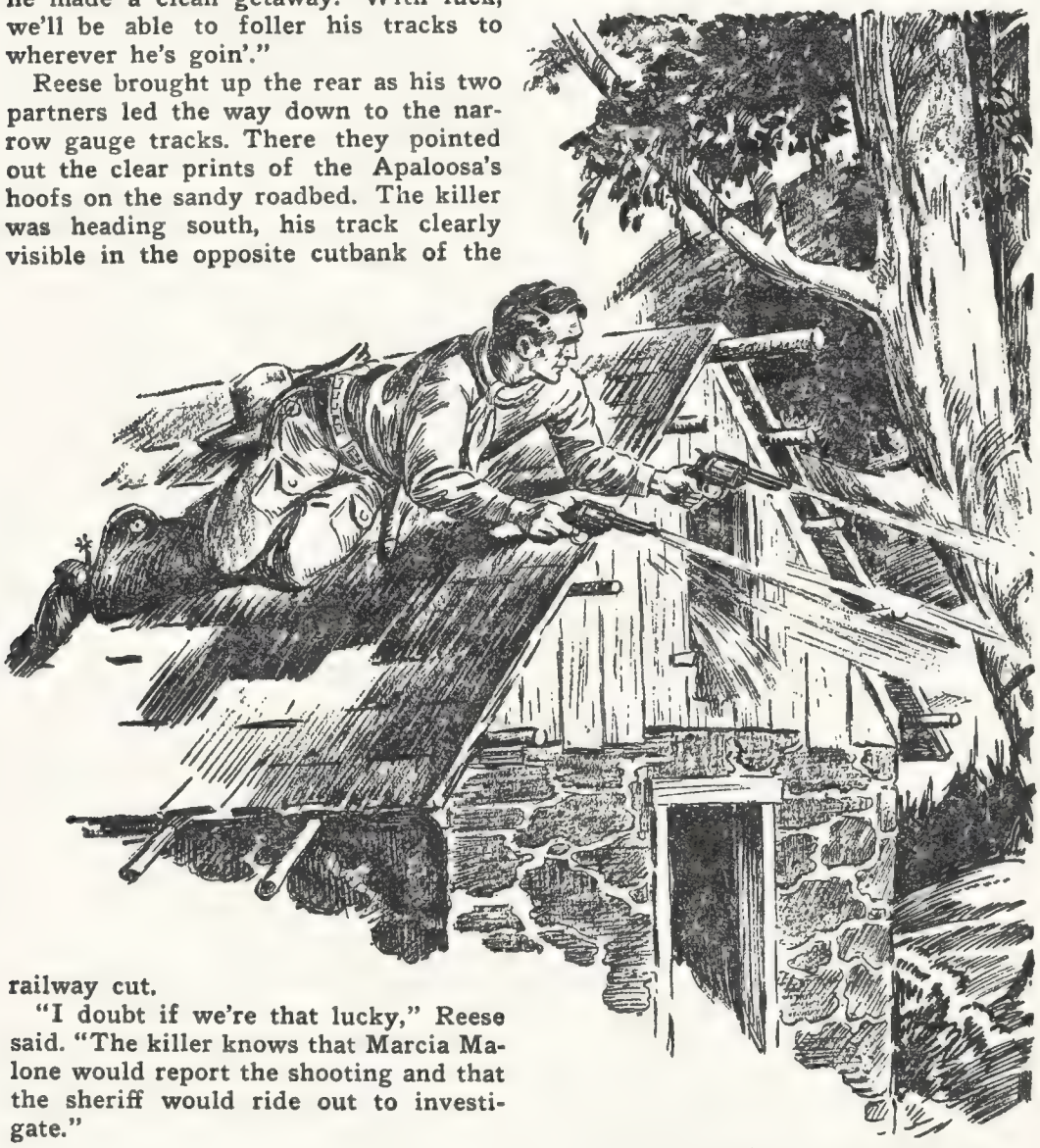
After Hank and Dusty had mounted, they led Reese up through the rocks to where Hank had found the stake to which the killer had picketed his waiting saddle horse.

"That cream-marked Apaloosa is a fairly distinctive horse," Reese pointed out. "The killer slipped up, not hiding his getaway mount out of sight of the passing trains. Although of course he had no way of knowing that three John Laws would be on hand to witness his shooting from a coach."

Hank Ball grinned, his bronzed fingers deftly shaping a brown-paper cigarette.

"Which is a break in our favor," the redhead pointed out. "Mr. Killer thinks he made a clean getaway. With luck, we'll be able to foller his tracks to wherever he's goin'."

Reese brought up the rear as his two partners led the way down to the narrow gauge tracks. There they pointed out the clear prints of the Apaloosa's hoofs on the sandy roadbed. The killer was heading south, his track clearly visible in the opposite cutbank of the railway cut.



"I doubt if we're that lucky," Reese said. "The killer knows that Marcia Malone would report the shooting and that the sheriff would ride out to investigate."

THE field chief's prediction was accurate. Within twenty feet of the Colorado & Rio Grande right-of-way, the killer's trail vanished in the turf of a broad mountain meadow where several hundred head of J-K Connected cattle were grazing. Their cloven hoofs had blotted out the horse's trail.

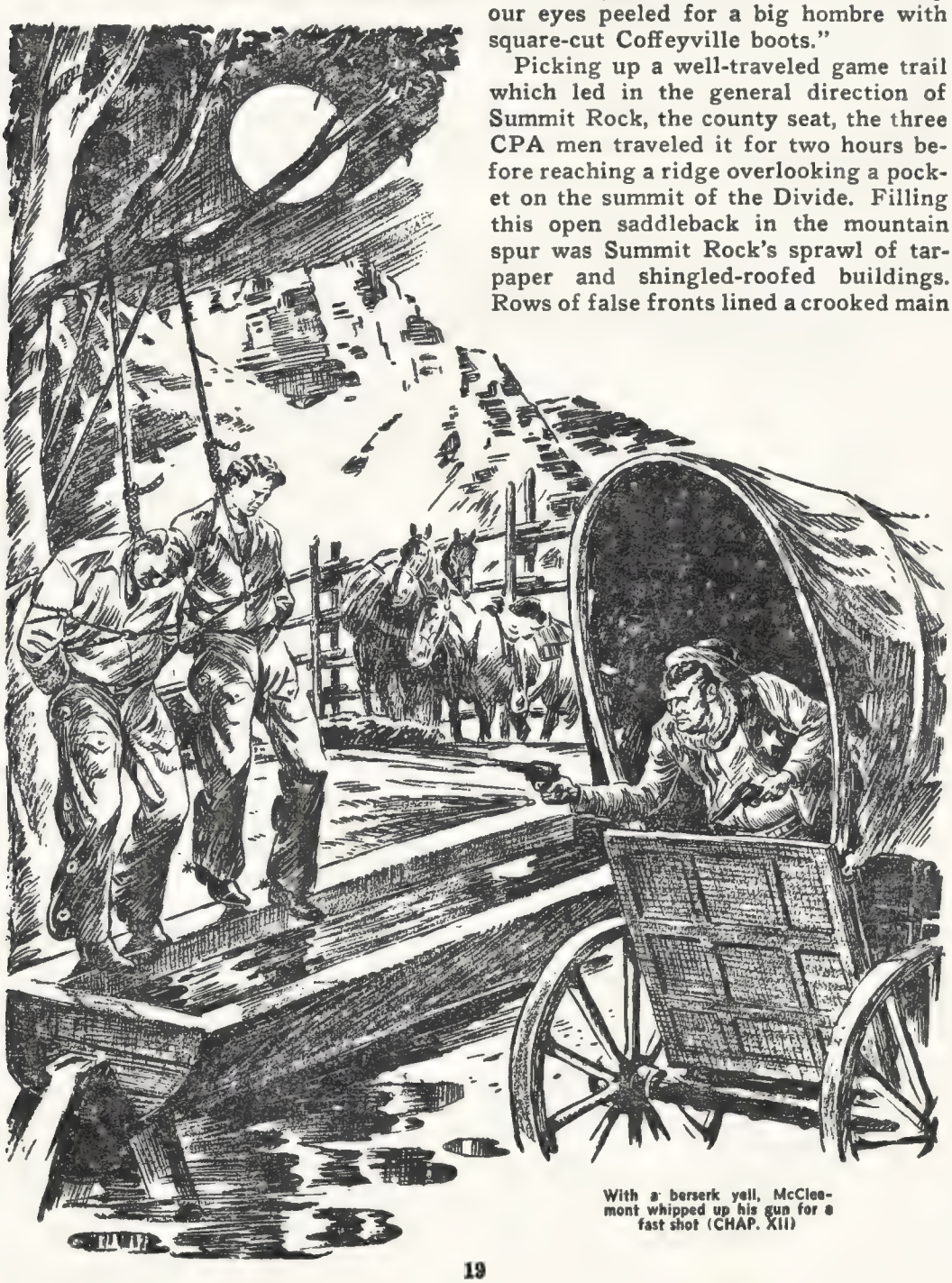
"That herd belongs to Joe Knight," Reese explained. "Which doesn't mean too much, the killer heading directly onto Knight's range. His combine owns most of the graze hereabouts, except for the Shamrock and Copeland's Twin C and a string of smaller spreads along the river."

Leaving the open acres of the natural

park, the three range riders soon saw the futility of trying to pick up a trail in the timber beyond.

"We'll ride to Summit Rock and have a look at the town," Reese decided. "We can at least get in touch with the sheriff there, and see if he knows of a cream-marked Apaloosa hereabouts. And keep our eyes peeled for a big hombre with square-cut Coffeyville boots."

Picking up a well-traveled game trail which led in the general direction of Summit Rock, the county seat, the three CPA men traveled it for two hours before reaching a ridge overlooking a pocket on the summit of the Divide. Filling this open saddleback in the mountain spur was Summit Rock's sprawl of tarpaper and shingled-roofed buildings. Rows of false fronts lined a crooked main



With a berserk yell, McCleamont whipped up his gun for a fast shot (CHAP. XII)

street which had been laid out without regard to a survey or the cardinal points of the compass.

"Summit Rock," drawled Dusty Trail, lighting up a fresh stogie. "One of the toughest cowtowns in Colorado, from what I hear. What'll we do, Doc—ride in together?"

Reese shook his head.

"In spite of the fact that we're working on this case independently, on a sort of busman's holiday," Reese said, "I think we'd better work the same as we do on one of Beauvine's regular assignments, boys. Ride into town separately, at twenty-minute intervals, and keep our badges out of sight. Pretend we're strangers if we meet on the main stem."

A sign on one of the ramshackle false-fronted buildings was visible from this elevation—the Mountain House Hotel & Bar—and the three CPA men agreed to register there, under assumed names. They would use the Mountain House as a rendezvous point.

Reese was the first to put his horse down the switchbacks into the cowtown. One glance at the county seat was enough to confirm Dusty's observation that Summit Rock, Colorado, was a tough settlement. Saloons, gambling dives, and fandango parlors outnumbered legitimate business houses ten to one along the main street's length. Deadfalls and honkytonks stood cheek by jowl in an unbroken line three blocks long.

Cow ponies, most of them carrying Joe Knight's J-K Connected brand, stood three-footed and hipshot at the crowded tie-racks on both sides of the street. The plank sidewalks were teeming with gun-slung, chap-clad riders, tough buckaroos from the timber-cattle outfits up and down Rawhide River. The canyon skirted the outer limits of the town.

Finding a livery stable on a back street, Reese turned his borrowed dun over to a hostler there. The liveryman's indifference turned to a sly inquisitiveness as, range-wise, he read the Shamrock brand on the dun's rump.

"Didn't know old Rocky was hirin' cowhands this spring," he commented. "How long does he think he can hold out ag'in Knifegash, stranger?"

Reese shrugged. "I'm just a thirty-a-month-and-found waddy," he said. "None of my business if the boss is buckin' heavy odds." It was one of the CPA field chief's accomplishments that despite his college degrees, and his usually impeccable English, he could drop into the drawl of a cowpuncher at any moment it was advisable.

"Well," observed the stableman, "Rocky ought to be rentin' gunhands instead of rope-slingers. This town's layin' odds that Knight's combine will own the Shamrock before the fall beef-gather."

LEAVING the stable, on his way toward the main street, Reese hoped that Hank and Dusty—due to arrive in Summit Rock at half-hour intervals behind him—would not blunder onto the same barn. Gossip traveled fast in a cowtown like this one, and if the word got out that three cowpunchers had drifted into town astraddle Shamrock ponies, the consequences might be explosive.

Strolling along the main street, Reese was inconspicuous, but his eyes were open and busy. Locating the sheriff's office in the courthouse jail wing, he spotted a saddle horse which carried a Twin C brand and was of course the property of Cliff Copeland, Marcia's fiancé.

Midway through Summit Rock, Steve Reese found himself in front of a big red-painted saloon dubbed the "Index Bar." The hitchrack before it was crowded with ponies and among them Reese's trained eye spotted an Apaloosa gelding with a cream-colored under barrel, with fresh lather dripping from its flanks.

Instantly, Reese knew he was looking at the mount on which the killer of Rocky Malone had made his getaway from Ten-mile trestle this morning. His

manhunt would focus on the customers inside the Index!

Passing the Apaloosa, Reese scowled as he saw that the horse was unbranded. No clue there as to its ownership then.

Shouldering through the batwings, Reese had a brief glance at the crowded barroom and realized that his best bet was to seat himself on one of the barrel chairs on the saloon porch and wait all afternoon, if need be, to see which cowhand came out to claim the Apaloosa.

Finding a vacant chair, Reese settled down, apparently just another loafer watching the big freight wagons and other traffic move along the cowtown street. He had no more than crossed his legs comfortably when a pot-bellied man with the bloated cheeks and bleary eyes of a barfly sidled over, hauled up a packing case and sat down beside Reese.

"Stranger in town?" the saloon bum asked, his whisky-fouled breath repelling Reese.

The CPA man nodded.

"Name's Tom Roebuck," wheezed the drunkard. "You ridin' for the Knifegash?"

Irritated by Roebuck's unwelcome attentions, Reese shook his head. "Just passin' through, Roebuck. Name's Reemo Stevens." He added, anticipating the barfly's next query, "From Texas."

Roebuck leaned closer, pointing a dirty-nailed finger at a group of cowmen who were standing on the steps of the Stockman's Bank across the street.

"Want to see a jigger who ain't got long to live, Stevens?" he whispered confidentially. "That young feller yonder, in the blue army shirt. Feller name of Cliff Copeland."

Reese's brows lifted as he stared at the man indicated. Cliff Copeland was a big man, in his early twenties, wearing knee-length chaps and a tipped-back black Stetson. He was in earnest conversation with several oldsters.

"Looks healthy enough," Reese said, needling his informant along.

Roebuck chuckled unpleasantly. "Copeland owns the Twin C outfit, t'other end of Rawhide Valley. President of the small outfits' cattle association. In town now with the other two-bit cowmen for a meetin'. The way Cliff's goin' to die, Stevens, is by lead pizenin'. He's tryin' to buck Joe Knight's combine. Which ain't healthy, no siree. Not the way things is shapin' up in these parts." The man's horselike whinny of amusement rankled Reese to the core.

Then, as Reese had been expecting, Roebuck got around to the original purpose for having braced a total stranger.

"Wouldn't have the price of a drink on you for an old broke-down cowboy? I'm tolerable thirsty, and my arthritis keeps me out of the saddle—"

WHILE Reese was rummaging his chaps pocket for a half-dollar, he probed the old tosspot for one more bit of information.

"This Joe Knight hombre you talk about makes a pretty big splash hereabouts, eh? Sort of figger he's the bull of the herd?"

Roebuck snatched the silver coin from Reese's fingers in his eagerness to get inside the Index and buy his dram of rotgut.

"Knight?" he chuckled. "Biggest cowman in Colorady, Stevens. When Knight says 'frog' everybody hops, from Sheriff McCleemont on down to yours truly. That's him comin' out of the saloon now."

Reese twisted around to eye the towering man who had just left the Index barroom. Roebuck scuttled through the fanning half-doors from which Joe Knight had just emerged.

Knight had the commanding figure and authoritative mien to go with ownership of the Knifegash Cattle Company. His massive frame was draped in an expensive fustian town coat, his Stetson was a sixty-dollar model in biscuit-tan beaver, and his tailored California pants, foxed with untanned buckskin, were neatly tucked into shop-made kangaroo leather star boots. Boots with square toes.

Reese had his close view of the wealthy land baron as Joe Knight paused to light an expensive Cuban perfecto. The man had close-cropped sorrel hair, his skin was ruddy with health, and some, no doubt—women, in particular—would consider him handsome in the classic Apolloesque tradition. But if Knight's agate-brown eyes were the windows of his soul, Steve Reese knew that Marcia Malone's appraisal of his character had not been exaggerated.

This man was as shrewd as he was predatory; a man of warped moral fiber, mad with ambition, and doubly dangerous because he had the money to back his greed with force.

Tugging on a pair of beaded buckskin gauntlets, the Knifegash boss shifted his shoulders in an arrogant gesture which seemed to exude self-confidence, and walked over to the hitchrack to loosen the half-hitches of his pony's reins.

Joe Knight was preparing to mount the unbranded Apaloosa gelding with the cream-colored markings!

CHAPTER IV

Killer's Challenge

REESE'S inscrutable face gave no hint of the wild rush of excitement which surged through him. Long training in trouble had schooled him in the fine art of keeping a poker face in moments of stress. He thought, "Rocky Malone was killed by Joe Knight himself," but he knew he had no positive proof of this; proof that could stand up in a court of law.

Circumstantial evidence, even the laws of probability, pointed to Joe Knight as the rider of the Apaloosa, and therefore the killer of Rocky Malone. But it was remotely possible that some other rider had ridden the cream-marked gelding back from Ten-mile Gulch, leaving the Apaloosa at the Index bar for Joe Knight to pick up.

The logical move was to contact the sheriff and turn over the case to him. But Reese was remembering Tom Roebuck's hint that Sheriff McCleemont was in league with Joe Knight. It was possible that the sheriff was either a crook, put into office by Knight's paid votes, or else Sheriff McCleemont was afraid of this cattle baron who sought to sew up the summer-graze rights of the range within the lawman's jurisdiction.

Accordingly, Reese remained seated while Joe Knight tightened his saddle girth, mounted, and backed the Apaloosa out into the street.

As Knight was reining around preparatory to riding off, Reese heard a voice shout from the bank opposite:

"Just a second, Knight. I want to see you a minute."

Like a rock cast into a placid pool, the effect of that voice, with its vague challenge, spread up and down Summit Rock's street. It was filled with a sudden electric suspense. For the challenger had been Cliff Copeland, president of the small ranchers' association in Rawhide Valley.

Sitting up with his instincts sharpened by a prescience of trouble about to break, Steve Reese watched the handsome young Twin C owner stride across the dusty street toward Joe Knight, jinglebob spurs chiming, lanky arms brushing his tied-down Colt handles with each stride.

Halting alongside Knight's stirrup, Copeland hooked thumbs in shell belts and looked up to meet the Knifegash Syndicate boss' cold grin.

"I am not aware that we have anything to discuss, Copeland," Joe Knight said with a slurring unctuousness which brought a flush of temper to Copeland's face. "But fire away."

Reese leaned forward, sharing the suspense of every other loafer on the Index porch as they witnessed the meet-

ing of these two arch enemies.

"I've called a meeting of the small outfits for four o'clock, Knight," Copeland said firmly. "We're meeting to decide whether or not we'll sell out to your combine. Maybe you ought to attend that meeting, find out just where Rocky Malone and Gill Espey and Ben Carter and the rest of us stand in this thing."

Joe Knight shrugged, unlooping a shot-loaded riding quirt from the high horn of his Pendleton saddle.

"Go ahead and have your meeting, Copeland," he drawled. "You've got the Knifegash's terms. When you're ready to make the deal, you know who my lawyer is."

Copeland stepped up swiftly to reach for the ring of Joe Knight's bridle bit.

"Not so fast, Knight!" he snapped. "I can tell you in advance that we'll make no deals—if it comes to defending our rights with gunsmoke. You attend our meeting and you'll find out why."

Steve Reese saw Joe Knight's arm go back in an innocent-seeming arc, and then, without warning, the range baron lashed his hand forward to quirt the young ranchman across the face.

Copeland fell back, blood spurting from the whip's lash across his nose and cheek. Pure instinct born of that sudden pain caused the Twin C waddy to reach a hand to gunstock.

Events broke with stunning rapidity then. Two whiskery-jawed cowpunchers who had been sitting in the chairs next to Steve Reese, idly whittling, suddenly leaped forward, guns drawn, their muzzles swinging over to cover Copeland's back.

STEVE REESE moved then from sheer reflex, knowing that these gunhawks were backing Joe Knight, that a shaved clocktick of time might see their lead slamming into Copeland's back.

"Hold yore fire, gents!" he barked. "You're both covered."

Reese's words froze the two gunmen on the saloon porch before they could squeeze triggers. From the corner of his eye Steve Reese saw that young Copeland had his own gun out of leather now, and was covering the mounted rancher forking the Apaloosa; but Reese had his hands full at the moment, reaming the muzzles of his own guns in the backs of the two big buckaroos who had jumped to Knight's assistance.

Copeland, shaking the blood out of his eyes, glanced around in time to see Reese's targets slowly thrust their six-guns back into holsters. Arms lifting, they turn to meet the drawn .45s of this stranger.

"You're a pilgrim," rumbled one of the gunmen, "or you wouldn't horn in where Knight's concerned, feller."

Reese's lips compressed against his teeth.

"You were set to shoot that feller Copeland in the back. Where I come from, a man doesn't stand idle and see that happen."

Out in mid-street, Joe Knight spoke softly, his emotions so completely un-

[*Turn page*]

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ruffled by this by-play on the saloon porch that the cigar in his lips was not disturbed.

"Pull in your horns, stranger. Kid Fletch and Sam Bozeman there work for me."

Reese kept his guns trained on the men called Fletch and Bozeman. He was aware that Cliff Copeland had moved away from in front of Knight's horse so as to put himself out of the line of Reese's fire if this explosive situation called for gunplay.

"Maybe you two had better ride out of town with your boss," Reese suggested to the bayed pair held motionless under the threat of his point-blank guns. "Keep your hands away from your hoglegs."

Fletch and Bozeman shuffled down the saloon steps and untied a pair of J-K Connected peg ponies from the Index rack. They climbed into saddle, riding out to flank Joe Knight.

Cliff Copeland, mopping the bloody welt on his face with his bandanna, slowly thrust his own gun back into scabbard. The tall stranger on the Index porch had the situation well in hand. The Twin C men's eyes flashed their message of thanks to Steve Reese as the CPA man let his gunhammers down easy and holstered his guns, his eyes concentrating on Joe Knight.

The Knifegash Syndicate boss looped his quirt over the saddle horn and carefully removed his cigar from his lips as he spoke softly to Reese:

"I don't know who you are, senor, but take my advice and don't let sundown catch you in Summit Rock."

Though realizing that he had inadvertently put the spotlight of the town's attention on himself, the CPA man answered Knight's ultimatum in a voice equally soft and fraught with menace:

"The name's Doc Stevens, and I'll dust out of town when I'm good and ready. Next time go easy with that quirt—especially when you've got paid gunslammers on hand ready to kill a man."

Knight picked up his reins, pure evil flashing from his slitted eyes.

"I think, friend Stevens," he answered, "you will not live long if you stick around Rawhide Valley." He glanced at the young ranch owner. "As for you, Copeland, never lay a hand on my bridle again."

Knight spurred the Apaloosa into a gallop from a standing start, fogging out of Summit Rock with his two villainous-looking gunmen riding at his stirrups.

Only now did the strain break on the streets of Summit Rock. Stepping down from the Index porch entrance, Reese heard a wheezy whisper from a porch loafer behind him:

"He saved Copeland's bacon, that's for shore, but I wouldn't be in that feller Stevens' shoes not for no money!"

HALTING alongside the saloon hitchrail, Reese waited until Copeland came to him, extending a rope-calloused hand which Reese accepted.

"I'm much obliged to you, Doc Stevens as you say your name is," the handsome young valley rancher said feelingly. "I lost my head, making a play when my back was turned to Bozeman and Fletch."

Reese said in a voice pitched too low to carry to the onlookers on the Index porch: "I met Miss Malone this morning, Copeland. That's why I was interested in backing your play."

Copeland's eyes showed a lively curiosity.

"Marcia? I've been wondering why she and her father haven't showed up for the meeting. Where did you see her?"

"Rocky won't be attending your meeting, Copeland," Reese said gently. "He was bushwhacked this morning at the Ten-mile railway trestle. Miss Marcia took his body back to the ranch."

Pure shock caused Copeland's jaw to unhinge.

"Rocky—dead? It—it can't be—"

"This Summit Rock sheriff, McCleemont," Reese went on in a tense whisper. "Where does he stand in this summer graze feud?"

Copeland, still mentally half stunned by the news of his prospective father-in-law's death, took a moment to consider Reese's question.

"Duane McCleemont?" he mumbled then. "He wears Knight's collar. . . You —you any idea who bushwhacked Rocky?"

Reese hesitated, not entirely sure of his ground. But he realized that if he was to trust anyone, he must trust Cliff Copeland. With Rocky Malone dead, the future of Rawhide Valley's summer graze depended on this Twin C rancher.

"Knight killed Malone," Reese said flatly, "and here's how I know that to be a fact . . ."

Cliff Copeland listened attentively as Steve Reese outlined the tragic events which he and his CPA partners had witnessed from the rear platform of the C&RG day coach this morning. The only facts which Reese did not disclose were the presence of Hank Ball and Dusty Trail in this vicinity. For the time being, Reese wanted to appear to be playing a lone-wolf game.

"With your permission, Mr. Copeland," Reese concluded his brief narrative, "I'd like to sit in on your cattlemen's meeting this afternoon. I'll tell you why when the time is right."

Copeland's trembling fingers touched the livid welt on his face, put there by Joe Knight's quirt.

"Of course, Stevens. We're meeting in the back room of the Warbonnet Casino at four o'clock."

Reese turned on his heel. "See you there, Copeland," he said, and moved back to the sidewalk.

Heads turned to stare after the ruggedly handsome stranger as Reese made his way down the street to the office of the Overland Telegraph.

There, Reese dispatched a code message to his superior in CPA headquarters at Austin, Texas, Colonel Beauvine. The message informed that the three CPA detectives had temporarily interrupted their vacation trip, but could be reached in case of emergency at Summit Rock, Colorado.

Leaving the telegraph office, Reese caught sight of Dusty Trail entering the Mountain House, where they had arranged to meet. Within the hour, Hank Ball also would be showing up in this cowtown. Both of his subordinates were as yet in ignorance of the dangerous turn of events which had overtaken their field chief since his arrival in Summit Rock.

Before they shook the dust of this tough cowtown off their boots, Reese realized that one or all of them might find a permanent address in Summit Rock's flourishing Boot Hill. Reese, at least, was already a marked man for Joe Knight's vengeance.

CHAPTER V

Last-Ditch Stand!

WHEN the hands of the clock on Summit Rock's weather-beaten courthouse tower stood at five minutes before four o'clock, Steve Reese entered the Warbonnet Casino and made his way through the maze of faro tables, chuck-a-luck layouts and poker tables to reach the private gambling room in the rear.

The door was guarded by a white-headed, sunken-cheeked old rancher whose batwing chaps carried the Broken C brand worked out in brass studs.

"Name's Ben Carter," the man at the door introduced himself to Reese. "I was standin' on the bank steps when you put the kibosh on Knight's hard cases this afternoon, Stevens. You want some friendly advice?"

Reese grinned, noting that old Carter had moved to block his passage through the doorway.

"You think I ought to pull stakes while I can, Carter?"

The dour-faced old ranchman nodded,

shifting a cud of eating tobacco to the other side of his jaw.

"For a driftin' saddle tramp, Stevens, you ought to be warned to steer shy of our trouble here in Rawhide Valley. Not that me and the other small-tally outfits don't appreciate what you done for Copeland. We'd have fell apart fast with our leader gone."

The CPA field chief cocked an ear toward the door, through the thin panels of which he could hear the muted buzz of conversation from the ranchers assembled here to discuss their black future in the face of Joe Knight's expanding ambitions.

"I have Copeland's permission to sit in on your confab, Mr. Carter," he said, smiling a little. "Any objections?"

Ben Carter pulled in a deep breath of resignation and stood aside to let Reese enter.

A scant half-dozen men were seated around a baize-covered poker table in this room. Young Copeland rose at once when he recognized the new arrival.

When Reese had been introduced to the other ranchers, he took a corner chair where he could listen in on the proceedings without appearing to intrude. One look at the stern faces of these men told the CPA chief that he was looking at cattlemen who had their backs to the wall, fighting an enemy too powerful for their weight.

When Carter came in from his lookout post and locked the door on the gambling hall out front, Copeland stood up and called the meeting to order.

"Ain't we goin' to wait for Rocky Malone, Cliff?" protested a shifty-eyed little rancher named Gill Espey, who ran cattle on the Lazy E range north of the cowtown.

Copeland flashed a glance at Steve Reese, got the CPA man's brief nod of permission to break the tragic news.

"Rocky Malone was drygulched on his way to town with Marcia this morning," Copeland said bluntly. "We're going to have to carry on without his help. It goes without saying, our association is well-nigh hamstrung without Rocky."

A shocked silence followed Copeland's announcement. Reese saw that these ranchers had relied heavily on the support of the Shamrock boss. He had learned from Marcia on their ride back up the valley this morning, that Rocky Malone had been the founder of the valley ranchers' association and though Cliff Copeland was its president, Malone was still its guiding hand.

"Men, I reckon that settles it, far as I'm concerned." Gill Espey was the first man to break the shocked silence. "Who knows who'll be the next on Knight's bushwhack list?"

Copeland spoke up quickly. "That's a pretty serious charge to make, Gill—saying that Knight was responsible for Rocky's killin'."

Big Ben Carter laughed without mirth. "Who else would want that old man out of the way? Where'd you find out about Rocky's bushwhackin', Cliff?"

Copeland avoided Reese's eyes as he shook his head.

"I'm not saying, just yet. Espey, you've always been the weak link in our organization, always wanting to sell out to the Knifegash. You know Knight has us crowded into a last-ditch stand. Are you going to desert us now?"

Espey squirmed nervously in his chair. "Well," he said hesitantly, "Knight's offered me five thousand cash on the barrel-head for my little two-bit spread. I'd rather have that *dinero* in my jeans than a bullet in the back."

COPELAND leaned across the poker table, his eyes on the Lazy E owner.

"You've been leasing summer graze to the Rafter O outfit the last three years, Espey," Cliff said. "At a dollar a head. How much did you clear last year?"

"Three thousand."

"And you didn't have to do a tap of work. The same with every other ranch owner in this room here. We can make a good living, build up our own herds, with money we get from the cattle outfits in the eastern part of the state who

are depending on us to hold their summer graze open. We can't let those outside outfits down, men. We've got to stand pat."

A hard-bitten rancher named "Buck" Kasky, owner of the Flying K ranch whose range included Ten-mile Gulch where Malone had been shot, entered the discussion.

"I've already written the prairie outfit I been dealin' with on this matter of summer graze. Begged 'em to send me men to help fight Joe Knight, before the Knifegash takes over the whole of Rawhide Valley. You think they were willin' to supply me any gun-toters? Not one! It looks like Knight has got the whole state of Colorado buffaloed and hogtied for brandin'."

Copeland cast a despairing glance around the table. Steve Reese, from his unobtrusive corner of the room, realized that defeat was overshadowing these men, that Rocky Malone's association was falling to pieces at this meeting.

"We've all got offers from Knight to sell out, for a mere pittance," Copeland said. "Men, I'm going to spring my ace in the hole. Like Kasky here, I've tried to persuade those prairie stockmen that this Rawhide Valley matter is their fight as much as ours, but they won't listen. But they ought to know that if the Knifegash takes over, Knight'll freeze out every outfit that depends on mountain grass to tide them over the droughts."

Despondent glances focused on Copeland. Gill Espey lit up his corncob pipe and said sneeringly:

"Let's see that ace in the hole you're talkin' about, young feller. It had better be good, or I'm ridin' up to Knight's J-K Connected tonight and tossin' the sponge over to him."

Copeland folded his arms over his husky chest.

"Men," he said feelingly, "you all know that Rocky Malone has been a long-time member of the Cattlemen's Protective Association. I feel that the time has come to call on the CPA for help. When they learn that one of their members has been bushwhacked, they'll send in range detectives to help us fight the Knifegash. That's what Rocky would have told you today, if he had lived to reach town."

DUSTY TRAIL

The ranchers assembled around the poker table considered this last-resort move for a few moments in silence.

"With Joe Knight importin' paid killers by the dozen," spoke up level-headed old Ben Carter, "gettin' ready to raid us valley ranchers by night, what chance would a few CPA range detectives have?"

Gill Espey suddenly got to his feet.

"I move we put this thing to a vote," the Lazy E boss said. "Them in favor of admittin' we can't lick this business, and selling out to Hashknife at whatever Knight will offer us—"

Steve Reese got to his feet and stepped over to the table. Reaching in his pocket, he tossed his silver law badge on the baize with a dramatic gesture which cut Espey's motion off short.

Carter was the first man to reach for the star. His voice shook as he read the inscription engraved on the badge:

FIELD CHIEF,
CATTLEMEN'S PROTECTIVE
ASSOCIATION

"Then Rocky sent for you, Stevens?" Cliff Copeland asked sharply, eyeing the man who had saved his life with new interest. "That was why you happened to be on hand when—"

Reese shook his head. "My being here is accidental," he said. "The CPA does not send its operatives out on a case until a bona fide member of the Association calls for help. In that event, the CPA will fight for its own to the last ditch, but that was not done in this case."

GILL ESPEY slumped back into his chair, eyeing Reese with a strange malevolence in his faded eyes.

"All right, star man," he drawled, "what do you propose? Remember it's our blood that'll be shed when Joe Knight calls the play."

Reese picked up his badge and pocketed it.

"I'll come into the open, men," he said gravely. "My name isn't Stevens. That is an alias I use when I am working under cover on a case. My real name is Steve Reese."

If the field chief had dropped a bombshell on the table, his words could not have carried more impact. A broad grin broke through the worry on Cliff Copeland's face as he shot a hand across the table to greet Reese anew.

"Doc Reese!" he said explosively. "I've heard plenty about you, sir. You were the man Rocky Malone hoped the CPA would send to us!"

Reese smiled bleakly. "Well, I'm here. My advice to you is to stand pat. I've got the deadwood on Joe Knight. I know positively that he was back of Rocky Malone's killing today. All I ask is that you sit tight and give me time enough to bring Knight to justice."

Reese's words brought new hope and confidence to this meeting which a few moments ago had been on the verge of capitulating to the pressure of the Knifegash Syndicate.

As the meeting broke up, Reese raised his arms for silence.

"I'm not quite ready to place Knight under arrest," he said, "because I need a bit more proof that he fired the shot that killed Rocky Malone. Although I witnessed Malone's killing myself, I did not actually see Knight pull the trigger. But I have other evidence—enough eventually to send Knight to the hangman."

The ranchers crowded around Reese, pumping his hand.

"One other thing," the CPA field chief cautioned them. "Don't let it leak out who I am, or that the Cattlemen's Protective Association has drawn cards in Joe Knight's game. Just go ahead and make your usual arrangements with the east-state ranches to furnish them summer graze as heretofore. I think I can promise you that Joe Knight will not stand in your way when grazing season rolls around."

The ranchers with new hope lighting their worried eyes, left the council room and repaired to the front of the Warbonnet Casino for a round of drinks. All except Gill Espey.

The Lazy E rancher slipped furtively out of the gambling hall and hastened over to the Index Saloon. In short order he was closeted in a private room with Joe Knight's foreman, Rickaree Ames.

"What happened at the meetin', Gill?" Ames demanded sharply, before Espey could speak. Ames had been awaiting a report. "You talk 'em into quittin' the valley?"

A note of terror was in the Lazy E boss' voice as he broke his news:

"You saw that good-lookin' stranger who threw his guns on Fletch an' Bozeman this afternoon when Copeland and the boss were squarin' off for a showdown?" he demanded.

The syndicate foreman nodded, scowling nervously.

"Well," burst out Espey, "that hombre is Steve Reese, field chief of the Cattlemen's Protective Association, Rick! You better light a shuck out to the ranch and warn Knight that the CPA has taken a hand to protect the valley against the Knifegash. Knight's had purty much of his own way in Rawhide Valley up to now. But he ain't ever taken on a man as big as this here Steve Reese."

CHAPTER VI

Death Strikes Twice

AS SUNDOWN gilded the snow-crusted peaks overhanging the cowtown, Steve Reese left the Warbonnet Casino with Cliff Copeland and old Ben Carter.

Young Copeland's saddle horse was waiting in front of the bank and he left town at once, eager to ride up the valley to the Shamrock spread and do what he could to comfort Marcia in this darkest hour of her life.

Reese, during a private talk with Carter, owner of the Broken C, had accepted the rancher's invitation to make his headquarters there, since Carter's ranch was the nearest to Summit Rock. In Carter's opinion, Reese would be taking an unnecessary risk by remaining in town. There was too much chance of his being cut down from ambush by one of Joe Knight's hired killers.

"I've got a little business to transact at the Mountain House before I leave town, Mr. Carter," the CPA field chief told his new friend. "If you could give me directions of how to reach your place, there's no need in your waiting around for me."

They were heading down the street toward the livery barn where Carter had left his horse.

"Just as well ride out with me, Reese," Carter said. "I don't mind telling you that us valley cowmen are pinnin' our last hope on you. I don't intend to let you get out o' my sight."

Reese grinned, turning into the big livery stable with Carter. He was debating whether to take the rancher fully into his confidence and tell him about Hank Ball and Dusty Trail. As a rule, Reese liked to keep his subordinates under cover.

"I'll mosey over to the Mountain House, then," Reese said, as Carter found a lantern and lighted it. "My horse is stabled across town—one I borrowed this morning from Rocky Malone's remuda. Meet you here in twenty minutes. That all right?"

Carter nodded and headed down the runway past the stalls to where his pony was stabled.

Reese had stepped back out of the barn's archway and was heading for the Mountain House to find his two lieutenants when he heard Ben Carter's voice lifted in a profane shout back in the rear of the livery stable.

"Hold on a second, stranger. Whose hoss are you saddlin' up here, anyhow?"

Something in the rancher's tone caused Reese to head back into the livery stable, believing that the old Broken C boss might have run into trouble of some sort.

He was in time to see a raw-boned man in seedy range clothing pausing in the act of cinching a saddle on a coal-black stallion at the far end of the row of stalls. The man wheeled, teeth glinting in the rays of Carter's lantern.

"That's my black you're boltin' your kak to, stranger!" the old rancher snarled. Setting the lantern down he advanced on the man with both fists cocked. "Danged if I don't think I've caught a horse-thief red-handed!"

In front of the barn, Steve Reese grinned, believing that Carter had stumbled onto a saloon bum mistakenly sad-

dling up the rancher's own mount. He started to turn away. Surely the fellow would apologize for his error.

But Carter's temper had the better of him and Reese saw the old man, crowding seventy if he was a day, throw a hard punch at the jaw of the man saddling the horse.

The fellow ducked the blow and countered with an uppercut which landed on Carter's unprotected jaw and drove him staggering backward to trip on his own spurs.

Reese had opened his mouth to yell at the giant-sized horse thief when he saw the fellow stab a hand to his belt and draw a long-bladed hunting knife from its sheath. Charging forward, the CPA man saw the horse-thief's hand go back, then streak forward, the knife hurtling through space like a comet to plunge hilt-deep in Ben Carter's ribs.

With a grunt of panic, the knife-slinger grabbed for the reins of Carter's black and pulled the big stallion out of the stall, obviously intending to make his getaway through the rear door of the stable.

EVEN as Reese palmed his gun with the intention of laying a shot in the horse thief's direction, Ben Carter rolled over to clear his holster. He pulled his Colt .45 from leather with a palsied hand. His gun blasted its nozzling spurt of flame and his bullet caught the horse thief in the back of the skull, dropping the knifeman as he was vaulting into saddle.

The man fell back in the straw bedding of the stable and lay motionless, dead. The black, snorting in panic, plunged back into the stall as Steve Reese raced up and knelt at Carter's side.

Smoke fumed up from the gun in the rancher's fist and coiled in milky eddies around the flickering lantern. Blood welled brightly around the knife imbedded in the old man's chest. One look at the gray pallor spreading over Carter's face told Reese that death was not far off for his new-found friend.

Laying a hand on Ben Carter's shoulder, Reese asked tensely:

"You know this horse thief, Carter? Is he one of Knight's men? Speak if you can!"

Carter's eyelids fluttered heavily. Crimson bubbles broke frothily on the corners of his mouth as he stared up at Reese.

"Can't—lay this one—at Knight's door, Reese. That horse thief—stranger—to me. Not—one of Knight's men. Drifter who thought—he'd steal hisself a prime hoss—"

A paroxysm of agony wracked old Carter's body. Reese knew there was no time to locate a doctor to treat the rancher's wound. The knife had penetrated too close to Carter's heart.

"Ain't this—heck of a way—to fray out my string?"

As he spoke, Carter's head dropped back, and Reese knew the rancher was dead.

Overcome by a sense of frustration and grief, Steve Reese did not hear a slight rustling of straw in the hayloft overhead, nor was he aware of the pair of beady eyes regarding him through the trap-door above the stalls. The whisky-reddened eyes of the saloon barfly, Tom Roebuck.

Reese got to his feet. The hostler was absent, probably out to supper. As yet no one was coming to investigate the sound of the gunshot. These circumstances gave Reese an idea.

Quickly he extinguished the lantern. In the darkness he pried the Peacemaker .45 from Carter's fingers and replaced the fired shell with a cartridge from his own belt. Then he thrust the gun back into the rancher's holster and placed the bail of the lantern in the dead man's hand.

Ben Carter's needless death might not be in vain, after all. His killing might fit into the vague scheme which was forming in Reese's fertile brain.

In the ammoniac reek of the stable, Reese lifted the horse thief's corpse and jack-knifed it over the stallion's saddle.

Lashing the corpse in place with Carter's lass'-rope, Reese seized the stallion's reins and led the horse out into the rear corral, unaware of Roebuck's watching eyes from the hayloft. In this moonless dark, no one else saw Reese open the far gate and head out through the fringe of the town, soon to be lost in the timber roundabout.

A mile from Summit Rock, Reese unloaded the dead man and pitched his body over the rim of a brush-choked

HANK BALL

canyon, hearing it fall and bounce down a rocky ravine, lost in the darkness. Then, tying the reins to the saddle-horn, Rese slapped Carter's stallion on the rump and turned it loose. The stallion would find its way back to its corral at Broken C during the night.

The one thing essential to Reese's plans was that the body of the anonymous killer should not be located for the next day or two.

By the time he got back to town, Steve Reese knew by the excited crowd around the livery stable that Ben Carter's body had been found, a knife jutting from his ribs. Passing that throng, the CPA field chief saw a black-coated undertaker and an assistant toting Carter's body out of the barn on a litter.

Flanking the stretcher bearers was a pot-bellied individual wearing a star on his gallus strap, whom Reese took to be Sheriff McCleemont.

TAKING advantage of the confusion, Reese made his way to the Mountain House Hotel, and found the lobby deserted. Even the desk clerk was gone, no doubt to join the crowd in front of the barn where Carter's body had been discovered. Consulting the hotel register which lay open on the desk, Reese noted the names of the last two to sign the book, under today's date:

J. Jeremiah, Kalispel, Mont. Terr. Room 8
Henry Hanscomb, Dalhart, Texas. Room 17.

Reese grinned and headed up the lobby stairs toward the upper story ."J. Jeremiah" was the undercover name masking the identity of Dusty Trail, his real name being Joshua Jeremiah Trail. Hank Ball was the occupant of Room 17, "Hank" being a nickname for Henry Hanscomb Ball.

A light glowed through a crack under the door of Room 8, and in a moment Steve Reese was reunited with his two range detective partners. Both men showed signs of their mounting impatience.

As briefly as possible, Reese outlined the sensational events which had marked his first few hours in Summit Rock, beginning with his discovery of the fugitive Apaloosa gelding with the cream-colored markings, the showdown between Cliff Copeland and Joe Knight, the subsequent council-of-war with the ranchers and ending up with Ben Carter's tragic demise.

"Looks like you've had all the fun so far," grumbled Dusty, spitting out the soggy remains of a nickel stogie. "We might as well drift along and let you—"

"You'll get your share of action, fat boy," chuckled Reese. "Listen! No one in town knows who killed Carter. I made sure that horsethief's carcass won't turn up until the buzzards draw somebody to his remains. "You know what? *You boys killed Carter*!"

Hank and Dusty exchanged puzzled frowns.

"Joe Knight is busy hiring every owl-hoot rider he can lay hands on," Reese continued. "What lays back of that is a showdown between the Knifegash and these small-tally valley ranchers. Their future welfare, plus summer graze for ranchmen east of the Rockies, hinges on what Knight plans to do next."

Hank Ball ran splayed fingers through his brush of fiery red hair.

"What's all this got to do with you hidin' the killer of this Carter hombre, Doc? You're leadin' up to somethin'."

Reese smiled. "Just this. I was the only witness to Carter's death. The town will jump to the conclusion that one of Joe Knight's gunslingers was behind that knifing. I want you and Dusty to leave town tonight and ride out to Knight's J-K Connected headquarters, five miles up the canyon."

Dusty Trail's baby-blue eyes flashed with excitement behind their heavy lids.

"You mean, you want Hank and me to pretend we're on the dodge—that we were the buskies who drove away with Carter?"

Reese nodded. "Right. I have a hunch Knight will offer to hire you on as Knifegash riders. Knight is in cahoots with Sheriff McCleemont here in town, so he won't turn you over to the law even if you confess to killing Carter."

Hank scowled. "What would be our motive for stabbin' a rancher we didn't even know?"

Reese shrugged. "Robbery, say? Anyhow, Knight will take it kindly, having one of his enemies out of the way. I think we can turn Carter's bad luck to our own advantage—if it means we can plant a couple of spies in Knight's camp, to tip us off what Knight's plans are against the valley ranchers."

Hank Ball reached for his hat.

"We're on our way, Doc. Anything's better than roostin' in this flea-ridden hotel."

DUSTY took a hitch in his gun-belt, his moon face glowing with excitement.

"Where do we catch you, Doc—if we do learn somethin' interesting?"

Reese thought a moment. "I was going to Carter's spread, but I'll be over at Cliff Copeland's ranch instead at the north end of the valley. Now, you boys shag along. I've got a little job to attend to here in town before I head for Copeland's place tonight."

After Hank and Dusty had left, Reese glanced around the hotel room, found an out-dated calendar on the wall, and tore off one of its pages. Using a soft-nose revolver bullet for a pencil, he composed a brief message, using printed capitals to disguise his handwriting:

SHERIFF MCCLEEMONT:

HERE IS SOME INFORMATION WHICH MAY BE OF VALUE IN RUNNING DOWN THE KILLER OF BEN CARTER TONIGHT.

I SEEN TWO RIDERS LEAVING THE TIMBERLINE LIVERY STABLE IN A BIG HURRY, JUST BEFORE CARTER'S BODY WAS FOUND. I THINK THEY KILLED HIM.

ONE WAS A FAT MAN, THE OTHER WAS RED-HEADED. THE HORSES THEY RODE WERE BRANDED WITH A SHAMROCK AND I HAVE A HUNCH THEY STOLE THOSE HORSES.

A FRIEND

CHAPTER VII

Outlaw Headquarters

SHERIFF DUANE McCLEEMONT turned up the wick of the night lamp in his office in the jail annex of the courthouse and lowered his portly bulk into a swivel chair. In the office with him was the owner of the Lazy E spread, Gill Espey, and a black-haired cavvy wrangler from

Joe Knight's ranch, a *mestizo* from the Border country known as the Chihuahua Kid.

Fishing a quart bottle of whisky out of his desk drawer, the sheriff bit out the cork, took a heavy swig of the Bourbon, and handed the bottle to Espey.

Wiping his flabby mouth with the back of his hand, the sheriff drawled: "Well, another valley rancher gone to Hades. Two in one day. Knight's speedin' up his campaign."

Espey drank from the bottle and handed it along to the swarthy-faced wrangler.

"Knifegash *better* work fast, Sheriff," the traitorous Lazy E owner observed, "if he's going to line up that summer graze before the CPA throws a wrench in the machinery. I tell you, Duane, when that stranger flashed his law badge at our meetin' this afternoon, my blood run cold. I've heard of this Steve Reese. He's a bad one to buck."

The "Chihuahua Kid" returned the whisky bottle to the sheriff.

"Somethin' fishy about Carter gettin' knifed," he said, puzzled. "I'm the only man on the J-K Connected pay-roll who uses a knife. And the boss didn't leave any orders to cash in Carter's chips that I know of. Carter was a harmless oldtimer. Cliff Copeland is the man Knight has got to watch."

Sheriff McCleemont thrust thumbs in the armholes of his calfskin vest and teetered his elephantine bulk back on the swivel chair to stare at the ceiling.

"I wish Knight hadn't done this killin' right here under my nose. Makes it embarrassin' for me. Only clues I located in the barn was some bloodstains on the hay, over in the stall. Strikes me that whoever it was knifed Carter, got wounded in the ruckus. That shore wasn't Carter's blood, with him six feet away."

Espey scratched his bald skull thoughtfully.

"Wonder if old Tom Roebuck could of done it?" he mused. "That barfly sleeps up in the Timberline hayloft of nights. I—"

Espey's words were interrupted at that instant by a heavy object striking the window pane alongside the sheriff's desk. The window shade bulged out sharply before the missile dropped to the floor in a shower of falling glass shards.

The Chihuahua Kid's gun leaped from leather and the half-breed smashed out the office lamp. As darkness engulfed the room, Sheriff McCleemont's boots hit the floor. The next moment the lawman collided with Gill Espey on his way to the door.

Peering out into darkness, McCleemont saw no sign of whoever had hurled the object through his window. He stood on the jail porch a long time, gun in hand, beady eyes probing the roundabout shadows of the coutrhouse yard. Then he moved back into the jail office, locating Espey and the Kid by their hoarse breathing.

"Light a match," he ordered. "I got a hunch some smart young 'un chucked a brick through my winder. Ain't the first time that's happened."

The Chihuahua Kid snapped a match with his thumb nail. Its shuttering yellow glow revealed the object which had been thrown through the window—an adobe brick, to which was tied a folded sheet of paper bearing the numerals of an out-dated calendar.

"Message of some sort," grunted the sheriff. Fumbling in a pigeonhole of his desk for a tallow candle he handed it to the Chihuahua Kid. "What in blazes—"

By the candle's beams, Espey and the Kid watched the sheriff's pudgy fingers remove the paper from the adobe brick and unfold it. McCleemont's fat lips were shaking as he read aloud:

Here is some information which may be of value in running down the killer of Ben Carter tonight.

When the sheriff had finished reading the note Steve Reese had written in the privacy of the Mountain House room, a gelid silence followed. Finally it was

broken by the Chihuahua Kid's whisper:

"A fat man and a redhead, forkin' hosses belongin' to Rocky Malone's outfit. That description don't fit nobody on Knight's pay-roll."

McCLEEMONT handed the message to the J-K Connected wrangler. "Whoever this hombre is," he said anxiously, "he didn't have the nerve to sign the message. That right there is proof that Knight must of been back of it. Nobody in town would dare come out in the open and tell me face to face that a Knifegash rider killed Carter."

The Chihuahua Kid thrust the mysterious message into his pocket, and headed for the door.

"Keep this thing under your hats, men," the half-breed said. "A crank may have writ that message and heaved it through your window, Sheriff, but I figger it's something the boss ought to know about."

Leaving the office, the Chihuahua Kid hurried down Main Street to where his cowpony was hitched in front of the Index Saloon. The J-K Connected cavvy wrangler had intended to spend the night in town, taking in a dance at the lodge hall, but the killing of Ben Carter was news that Joe Knight should know, especially if Knight had not engineered Carter's death.

Leaving Summit Rock at a gallop, the *mestizo* followed the canyon westward until he reached the high mesa backed by snow-clad peaks which comprised the Knifegash Syndicate's headquarters ranch. Crossing the mesa, the Kid saw lights burning in Joe Knight's ranchhouse, as well as in the long, rambling bunkhouse where the crew lived.

Passing the bunkhouse, the Chihuahua Kid had a fleeting glimpse of a poker game going on inside. He headed on past the hay barns and cavvy corral, and reined up in front of Knight's big Monterey-style ranchhouse.

Two saddle horses were hitched to the picket fence. By the fanwise spread of light coming from the window across the yard, the Chihuahua Kid got a look at the brands on those ponies.

"Rocky Malone's Shamrock!" he muttered, surprise lancing through him. "What in tunket would bring any of Rocky's men onto J-K Connected—"

Then he recalled what the mysterious note had said about the two fugitives from the barn where Colburn had died, making their getaway on Shamrock-branded horses.

Breaking into a run, the Chihuahua Kid vaulted the fence and sprinted across the yard toward the long gallery of the ranchhouse. Two cowhands were seated in the shadows there. The Kid recognized them as "Kid" Fletch and Sam Bozeman, gunhands whom Joe Knight had recently imported from Texas.

"Howdy, Chihuahua," greeted Bozeman. "You heard who that hombre was who put a gun in Fletch's and my backs this afternoon?"

The Chihuahua Kid nodded. "Cattle Association feller, Espey says. Listen! Who owns them broncs out at the gate?"

Fletch shrugged beefy shoulders. "Couple of strangers. Come foggin' from town. Showed up at the bunkhouse and asked for the ramrod."

"What'd these strangers look like?"

"Why, one of 'em was a red-headed galoot, an' t'other was built like a tub of lard," Sam Bozeman answered. "Wouldn't talk to nobody but the foreman or the boss. So Rickaree brought 'em over here for a pow-pow with Knight. Seems those strangers left town in a considerable of a hurry, on borried horses."

The Chihuahua Kid waited to hear no more. Entering the ranchhouse without knocking, the cavvy wrangler heard voices issuing from the room which Joe Knight used as his office. Crossing the living room, he stooped to peer through the keyhole.

Joe Knight, holding a long cool drink in his hands, was seated at his desk, with the straw-boss, Rickaree Ames, standing at his side. Facing the two were

the strangers Bozeman had described, one a handsome young redhead, the other a roly-poly who was speaking through a dense cloud of stogie smoke.

"It's like Hank here told you, Mr. Knight," he was saying. "Our horses was broke down from dodgin' that posse across the desert, so we went into the Timberline Livery to see about gettin' some fresh nags, amin' to be on our way to Nevada."

JOE KNIGHT took a sip from his mint julep.

"So you decided to borrow a black stallion with a Broken C brand, eh?" he asked cagily. "And the owner caught you?"

The two strangers nodded.

"An old codger," the redhead informed. "Didn't know him from Adam. Anyhow, he throwed a gun on Dusty here. There was nothin' else to do but jab my sticker in his brisket, Mr. Knight."

The Chihuahua Kid let himself into the office, drawing only the briefest of glances from Knight and the foreman.

"Let me get this straight," the Knifegash boss said, setting his drink on the arm of his chair. "You killed a man, who must have been Ben Carter, from your description. One of the first settlers in Rawhide Valley, therefore an important citizen. You picked up a pair of horses belonging to another prominent valley rancher, Rocky Malone, and hightailed out of town."

"That's right, sir." Hank Ball said quickly. "Dusty and me, with our faces on reward posters all over Colorado, we couldn't afford to be caught around that barn with a dead man. Sheriff might spot us too easy."

Joe Knight glanced at Rickaree Ames, raw suspicion in his eyes.

"I don't get it," he said. "You confess to killing Ben Carter who, for all you know, might be a personal friend of mine. You admit you're both wanted men with bounties on your scalps. What

[*Turn page*]

oh-oh, Dry Scalp!
"SAM'S nice, but he'd be a lot nicer if he did something about that Dry Scalp! His hair is dull and unruly—and he has loose dandruff, too! I've got just the ticket for him—'Vaseline' Hair Tonic!"
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makes you think I won't turn you over to Sheriff McCleemont and collect those rewards?"

Dusty made a gesture with his fuming stogie.

"We picked up some talk at the bars in Summit Rock, Mr. Knight. Enough to make Hank and me think maybe we'd be safer holin' up on the J-K Connected than take our chances on crossin' these Rocky Mountains, with the telegraph wires maybe warnin' Johnny Laws on the other side to patrol all the passes."

"Yeah," added Hank Ball. "We heard you were hirin' men who had expert trigger fingers, Mr. Knight. If we are wrong—we just gambled and lost, that's all."

Knight glanced around, focusing his attention on the Chihuahua Kid.

"You look excited, Kid." The Knifegash boss grinned. "I suppose you rode back to tell me you found out that Steve Reese of the CPA showed up to take sides in our little range war?"

The Kid shook his head, stepping forward to hand Kinght the message which had been hurled through the window of McCleemont's office on hour before.

Scanning the scrawled words as he listened to the Chihuahua Kid's explantion, Joe Knight finally struck a match and touched the flame to the paper, letting it fall in ashes to the floor.

Hank Ball and Dusty Trail eyed this byplay warily, suspense laying its sharp edge against them.

"Gentlemen," the Knifegash landgrabber drawled to them, "you have come to the right place. A man on the dodge is safe in my bunkhouse. You will draw top fighting wages until I have completed my business in Rawhide Valley."

NEXT ISSUE

RIVER TROUBLE

A Tense Border Story

By BARRY SCOBEE

CHAPTER VIII

Kidnaper's Trail

TEN minutes after Steve Reese had heaved the adobe brick through the window of the jail office, he was headed north, away from the cowtown. He took the road which skirted the meandering Rawhide River up the valley.

He was gambling on his fake message reaching the ears of Joe Knight, eventually. Reese had based his strategy on the hint which the saloon bum, Tom Roebuck, had given him regarding Sheriff Duane McCleemont being in close cahoots with the land-grabbing rancher.

That message, placing the blame for Carter's death on two strangers, should play a big part in establishing Hank and Dusty in Knight's confidence. For with the Rawhide Valley range war fast approaching a showdown, Reese knew he could not hope to break the power of Knight's combine unless he had his own men planted in the camp of the enemy.

Reaching the Ten-mile Gulch railway trestle, Reese found it hard to realize that less than eighteen hours had elapsed since he and his partners had witnessed Rocky Malone's murder at this spot. A lifetime of thrilling danger had been packed into this day; a complicated skein of events such as Reese had never experienced in his career behind a law badge.

He thought of the trust the smalltally ranchers were placing in him, and the knowledge of that responsibility was sobering. He thought of Marcia Malone, left alone to carry on the fight against Joe Knight's encroaching cattle empire up on the Shamrock spread. He felt a strange warmth go through him, knowing that the girl so tragically bereft by Knight's ruthless bullet would

have Cliff Copeland behind her in the difficult weeks ahead.

Off to the northeast, Reese saw the twinkling lights which marked the Twin C Ranch. He forded the Rawhide to make his way across the open valley.

It was well past midnight when the CPA field chief hailed the house, his coming telegraphed in advance by the yammering of Copeland's collie dogs. The lights went out in the ranchhouse and Reese had another proof of the reign of terror which was blighting the lives of these ranchers who depended on the leasing of their summer graze to carry on.

A woman's sharp voice challenged Reese as he reined up, his horse, surrounded by snarling dogs:

"Who is it?"

"A friend," the CPA man called. "Is Cliff Copeland home?"

After a short silence, Reese heard the young rancher's voice coming from the black void of the porch:

"It's all right, Ma. That's Steve Reese."

Shortly Reese was once more greeting Cliff's elderly parents, those hardy pioneers who had been among the first settlers in these Colorado foothills. They had worked a long lifetime, but now had turned the running of their ranch over to their stalwart son.

"We buried Rocky Malone this evening, Mr. Reese," Mrs. Copeland said tearfully. "It—it's a nightmare, wondering if Pa an' me will be burying our own son next. We know Cliff is next on Knight's list—" After reassuring her that things were not as bad as she thought, Reese joined the Copelands in a midnight supper, glanced around the table and inquired:

"Where is Miss Marcia? Didn't you bring her home with you?"

Cliff flushed. "She insisted on staying over at the Shamrock after the funeral. Couldn't bear to leave Rocky alone, his first night under the sod. I wanted Ma to stay with her, but Marcia wouldn't have it. We just got back."

"I'd like to bunk here tonight, Cliff, if I may," Reese said hesitantly.

Copeland grinned. "Of course, Reese. But I thought you were staying with Ben Carter?"

It was hard, breaking the news of their neighbor's death to the Copeland family. This was their first word of it because young Cliff had left Summit Rock before that tragedy had occurred.

Mrs. Copeland buried her face in her hands.

"The Knifegash is too big to buck any longer!" she sobbed. "I'd rather give this ranch to Knight than run the risk of anything happening to Pa or Cliff or any of our riders—"

Reese shook his head. "The net is closing in on Knight and his owlhoot crew, ma'am. As a matter of fact, Knight wasn't back of Carter's killing. I can't explain why just yet, but Carter's death may play an important part in putting a hangrope around Knight's craw, just the same."

REESE slept that night in a spare room in the Copeland ranchhouse, despite his protests that he should go out to the bunkhouse.

He was roused at dawn by young Cliff.

"Sorry to have breakfast so early, Reese," the Twin C boss apologized, "but I want to get over to the Shamrock and talk Marcia into comin' over here with us, even if I have to talk her into advancing the date of our weddin'. We'd planned to get married this fall after the beef roundup."

After breakfast Copeland and Reese saddled up and soon were jogging up the valley toward the neat whitewashed buildings marking the Shamrock headquarters.

Reese, sizing up the lush graze of this valley, noting its inexhaustible water supply from the melting snows of the high country, realized what a prize Rawhide River's small ranches would be for Knight's syndicate. With this valley drawn into J-K Connected's web, Knight

would never have to worry about summer graze even in the worst drought years.

Deciding the time had come to take Copeland into his full confidence, Reese explained the set-up as it concerned his lieutenants, Hank Ball and Dusty Trail.

"With luck, they'll be eating breakfast with the Knifegash crew this morning," Reese concluded. "Whatever plans Knight makes for fighting you valley ranchers, Hank and Dusty will be able to tip us off."

As they neared the Shamrock grounds, Copeland sent his call ahead. No answer came back from the Malone house.

"Nothing to worry about," Reese said reassuringly, noting Copeland's anxious scowl. "Marcia probably spent most of the night crying in her pillow. She just isn't awake yet."

Skirting the river bank toward the ranchhouse, Reese noted the fresh grave mound under the cottonwoods, where old Rocky had been laid to rest by starlight yesterday evening. The grave had been heaped with wild flowers which Marcia and Mrs. Copeland had picked.

"I don't like this, Steve," Copeland said, when his second call brought no response from the house. "Marcia is always up with the sun. She promised she'd be over to our place for breakfast. If anything has happened to her—"

Steve Reese felt a premonition of disaster stir the hairs of his neck-nape as they dismounted in the well-kept yard and ran up the flower-bordered path.

The front door of the ranchhouse was wide open. Copeland shouted the girl's name again as they entered the parlor. Empty echoes answered them.

With a hoarse cry of alarm, Copeland rushed to Marcia's bedroom. On the threshold of the open door he halted stockstill, with Reese staring over his shoulder at the scene of confusion.

Marcia Malone's bed had not been slept in. A table was overturned. A scrap of fabric which lay on the floor Reese recognized as a fragment torn from the blouse Marcia had worn yesterday on her ill-fated trip to town in the buckboard.

"She's been kidnaped!" Copeland yelled, his voice breaking on a note of anguish. "That's Joe Knight's way of bringin' me to heel—attacking me through Marcia!"

While Copeland was running through the rest of the house, making sure the girl was nowhere around, Steve Reese sized up the bedroom, then walked over to the open window. There was a flower bed close to the wall under that window, and in the moist loam were the deep imprints of spike-heeled cowboots, where two men had stood. Gouged places on the painted clapboards revealed where spur rowels had scraped the wood as the prowlers had climbed into and out of the window.

STRADDLING the sill, Reese leaped clear of the flower bed and was kneeling to inspect the footprints when Cliff Copeland appeared in the window. The young rancher's face was chalk-white with concern.

"She's nowhere in the house, Reese!"

Reese shook his head.

"Have another look around, fellow, just in case her kidnapers forced her to leave a ransom message behind. I'm beginning to think this is Knight's method of forcing you and the Shamrock to surrender your range, at that."

After Copeland had turned back into the house to obey Reese's orders, the CPA field chief headed across the bluegrass lawn. At its edge, he saw where horses had been hitched to the fence. Plainly visible in the dust there were the marks of a small foot that had been wearing carpet slippers or moccasins.

Copeland soon joined him, his jaw hard and grim.

"Two riders kidnaped her, put her on a horse at this spot," Reese said gravely. "Bring our ponies over, Cliff. We'll try our hand at tracking them."

To Reese's surprise, the trail of the outbound kidnapers was plain to read,

heading across the dew-wet pasture land toward the river. Three horses. The kidnapers had either brought along a horse for Marcia to ride, or had appropriated one from the Shamrock corral.

When they reached the river, they saw where the men they were pursuing had deliberately chosen to cross open areas of mud, leaving a clear trail behind.

"It all adds up, Cliff," Reese said. "The trail leads toward Knight's ranch, and I think they intended you to follow it. I imagine a quit-claim deed to the Shamrock and to the Twin C will be the ransom Knight will demand for Marcia's safety."

Tears were streaming down Copeland's weathered cheeks. Unashamed, he made no effort to suppress them.

"I'll do it!" he panted. "I'd give up everything we've worked for to get Marcia back! But if they've harmed one hair on her head, I'll hound Knight to his grave if it takes the rest of my life—"

Spurring into a canter, they followed the plainy defined trail of the kidnapers across the west portion of Rawhide Valley and up into the wooded hills. There Marcia and her captors had taken an old Indian trace to carry them into the uplands.

It was high noon when Reese and Copeland reined up on a ridge where the Indian trace dipped into a verdant mesa. Less than a mile away Joe Knight's ranch buildings were shimmering under the Colorado sun.

"It would be too risky for you to show up at the enemy's snake nest," Reese said. "I'm taking over here, Cliff. If Marcia is being held prisoner at Knight's ranch, I'll bet my last blue chip she's safe and sound."

Cliff Copeland rubbed his gun butt nervously.

"You forgetting that Knight promised to kill you if you showed up again, Reese—after that play in front of the Index Saloon yesterday?"

Reese picked up his reins.

"It's a risk I've got to run," he said adamantly. "We can't afford to let Knight bait a man-trap for you with Marcia Malone."

CHAPTER IX

Marcia's Answer

CLANGING hammers, beating on a suspended wagon tire, roused the sleeping J-K Connected Crew in the black hour between the false and the true dawn. With the others Hank Ball and Dusty Trail rolled out of their blankets in the Knifegash bunkhouse and stifling yawns started hauling on their overalls and boots.

They heard the cavvy wrangler, the Chihuahua Kid, voice a remark and ask a question as he lighted the bunkhouse stove to heat water for shaving.

"Rickaree's bunk ain't been slept in. Wonder what kept the ramrod on the prowl last night?"

No one supplied an answer. Hank and Dusty thought nothing more about Rickaree Ames' absence from the bunkhouse, having last seen the foreman when he brought the two new crew members down to the bunkhouse last night. But when the crew assembled in the chow shack for breakfast, Rickaree Ames was at the head of the long table, his face gaunt from a sleepless night.

"Been down to town, Rick?" asked Sam Bozeman.

Ames laughed. "Little jaunt over to Rocky Malone's hogan with the boss. We dabbed our loop on that Marcia filly."

Hank and Dusty stiffened, keeping their eyes on their plates. Joe Knight and the foreman had kidnaped the daughter of the old rancher whom they had seen killed!

Ames' disclosure caught the entire outlaw crew by surprise. Finally the Texas gunslinger, Kid Fletch, spoke up.

"I've rented my guns in a lot of range wars in my time, but danged if I ever seen a boss stoop to rustlin' women. What does Knight want with the Malone girl?"

Ames poured molasses over his stack of buckwheats and laughed slyly.

"The boss figgers to sew up the valley's summer graze before the Cattlemen's Protection Association can figger out a way to stop us, is all."

"Where's he got the girl?" the Chihuahua Kid asked curiously. "At the house?"

Ames shook his head. "We brought her over around two o'clock, hogtied like a loco steer. Joe slapped her in the old root cellar back in the timber behind the horse barn."

A hoarse round of guffaws circled the table at this news.

"Goin' to give her the starvation treatment until she signs over Rocky's ranch, eh?"

Ames grinned, but it was an unpleasant expression. "Somethin' like that. Matter of fact, the boss figgers he's killin' two birds with one stone. He'll force this Marcia girl to give up her spread, and it won't be long before young Copeland will be showin' up lookin' for her. We left an easy trail for him to foller. Copeland won't be hangin' onto his Twin C graze for long when he finds out it'll mean his girl's life if he don't do like Joe wants."

Following breakfast, most of the crew repaired to the horse corrals where Sam Bozeman and Rickaree Ames were breaking some green stuff to the halter. Taking advantage of this excitement, the two new members of the Knifegash crew, Hank and Dusty, slipped into the horse barn for a council of war, on the excuse that they wanted to soap their saddles.

"We got to locate that spring-house and get Marcia out of here," Hank Ball whispered urgently.

Dusty Trail chewed on his cold cigar, beads of sweat coasting down his fat jowls.

"Risky," he admitted, "but it's got to be done. Maybe one of us ought to sneak off and ride to Copeland's place to let Doc know."

Suspense was a biting acid in their veins as the two CPA waddies slipped out the rear door of the barn, out of view of the Knifegash crew assembled at the corral fence, and slipped into the nearby jackpine timber.

A PATH led off into the forest. At its end they located the sod-roofed mound of a cellar used for storing potatoes over the winter. This, according to the foreman's report in the chuck shack, was Marcia Malone's prison.

Skulking through the thick serviceberry brush which grew up to the root cellar, Hank and Dusty located the steps leading down to a thick slab door. The cellar had no windows. The peak of its roof was broken only by a louvred ventilator shaft.

"It ain't locked," whispered Hank, pointing to the padlock hanging on an open hasp. "We ought to be able to turn Marcia loose and—"

Dusty clamped a moist palm over Hank's mouth. To their ears came a sound of voices from the cellar:

"My answer is still no, Joe Knight. I'd rather die than sign over the Shamrock to you!"

The heavy, threatening voice of the Knifegash range baron lashed against the eardrums of the two CPA detectives in the brush:

"We left an easy trail to follow last night, ridin' over from Shamrock. Wouldn't surprise me if young Copeland isn't readin' that sign right this minute. You want to lead him into a bushwhack trap, the same dose as we gave your father?"

Hank Ball eased his six-gun from leather and started forward, only to have Dusty pull him back. They could

hear the sound of the girl's heavy breathing issuing from the root cellar.

"Cliff can take care of himself!" she said defiantly.

Flinging a last word to her, Joe Knight opened the cellar door and stepped out, closing and padlocking the door.

"I'll bring Cliff over as soon as he shows up, Marcia," the J-K Connected boss called through the heavy slabs. "Think over my proposition in the meantime."

Dusty maintained his hard grip on Hank's arm as the rancher passed them less than ten feet away, heading back along the path toward the ranchhouse.

"What's the idea?" demanded Hank, when Knight was out of earshot. "I had my sights lined on that polecat."

Dusty shook his head. "We got to have horses ready for a getaway, you hot-headed fool. A shot would have brought a passel of gunslingers after us. We've got to play this close to our chests, for that girl's sake."

Hank groaned, believing they had let a priceless opportunity slip through their fingers.

"All right, fathead," he whispered. "What's your plan?"

Dusty frowned thoughtfully. "Play the cards like they lay throughout the day, just in case Copeland shows up. If he falls into Knight's trap, they'd kill him sure if they found Marcia had escaped. After dark tonight we can get her out of that cellar, give her a fast horse and send her kitin'."

Reluctantly admitting the wisdom of Dusty's level-headed thinking, Hank followed his roly-poly partner back to the barn. They took their saddles down from their wall pegs and were starting the soaping job when a shadow fell across the barn doorway. The J-K Connected foreman, Rickaree Ames, poked his head in.

"All right, you two—hustle over to the bunkhouse. The boss is callin' a mass meeting of the crew. Looks like you're going to get some action, the first day you're on the pay-roll."

Filled with misgivings, Hank and Dusty left the barn and walked over to the bunkhouse. The entire crew, down to the Chinese cook, were on hand.

After a short wait, Joe Knight left the ranchhouse and headed to where his crew was assembled.

"Men," he said in a loud voice as he entered the bunkhouse, "you've all been spoiling for action. Well, the time has come to see how you perform with gunpowder in your noses."

BROAD grins lit the faces of the outlaw crew.

"I think you all know," Knight went on, "that the Cattlemen's Protective Association has been called in by the valley ranchers to help the small-tally boys hang onto their summer graze along the Rawhide. That means I can't play this thing as cautious as I had planned in the first place."

The Chihauhua Kid grinned venomously. "Now you're talkin', boss! Hot lead and hangrope are the only language them nesters can understand."

Knight raised his hands for silence.

"Tonight," he said, "we are going to move in on the valley in force, starting with Cliff Copeland's Twin C Ranch—providing Copeland don't show up here today and make that unnecessary. We are going to burn a few barns, stampede a few head of cattle, cut a few bobwire fences."

A spattering of applause told the grinning syndicate boss that his crew was backing him one hundred per cent.

"After we've burned out the Twin C, we'll skip down to Gill Espey's. Gill is working with us undercover, but for his protection, we'll fire his place, so nobody

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will ask questions. There's no need of going to Carter's ranch, since our friends Hank and Dusty here took care of that old-timer for us."

The two CPA men felt thmeslves prodded joshingly by the outlaws who hemmed them in.

"By midnight," Knight went on, "we should be south of Ten-mile Gulch, cleaning out the middle-valley spreads. By morning, this Steve Reese hombre won't have anything to protect. And he'll play heck proving that the Knifegash was behind tonight's raid. We will—"

Knight broke off as a drumroll of hoofbeats caught his ear. All eyes turned in the direction of the Summit Rock road, in time to see a lone horseman galloping in.

To most of these men, that rider was a stranger. But to Hank Ball and Dusty Trail, the approaching horseman was a man heading toward certain doom.

"Steve Reese!" ejaculated Knight, dropping a hand to gun butt. "The CPA field chief himself—ridin' into the lion's den in broad daylight!"

Stark horror filled Hank and Dusty as they watcher the field chief pull his Shamrock-branded horse to a walk, reining straight toward the bunkhouse.

Joe Knight said in a low voice. "He doesn't know we're wise to him being a John Law, boys. Let me handle this. Act natural, all of you."

Hank and Dusty exchanged despairing glances. What foolhardy whim had brought Reese to the J-K Connected in broad daylight this way? Even if he were aware of Marcia Malone's kidnaping, it was incredible that he would be foolish enough to demand her release against the odds Knight had waiting here.

The Knifegash gunhawks stirred uneasily as Steve Reese rode up, a broad grin on his face. His hand lifted to greet the taut-visaged Joe Knight.

"Señor Stevens, I believe," Knight called out. "I know I told you to get out of Summit Rock, Stevens, but I didn't think you'd take me so literally."

CHAPTER X

Six-Gun Stalemate

LIMPED black eyes swept over the hostile faces before him as Steve Reese picked out Hank and Dusty in the midst of Knight's crew. His hunch that they had been accepted as members of Knight's faction was confirmed.

"That's exactly why I'm here this morning, Mr. Knight," Reese said, hooking a booted leg over his pommel. "When I intervened in that little street brawl yesterday, I wasn't aware where the weight lay in this country. I came out to apologize for putting a gun on your waddies."

Joe Knight cuffed back his Stetson and met the piercing strike of Reese's gaze.

"That's right polite of you," he sneered. "But I'm sure Bozeman and Fletch hold no hard feelings about what happened yesterady."

Reese's strong fingers were busy shaping a cigarette, his hands showing no sign of tremor.

"I understand you are hiring men who can handle guns as well ropes, Mr. Knight. Any chances of hangin' my hat in your bunkhouse?"

In the following silence, Sam Bozeman called out sharply.

"He's forkin' one o' Rocky Malone's nags, Boss! This looks plumb fishy to me."

Reese shrugged. "Easily explained," he said carelessly. "I drifted into these foothills by way of Rawhide Valley, from the north. Since my own horse was a bit ganted after crossing the desert, I threw my hull on the first grazing animal I run across. Which happened to be a Shamrocker."

Sweat was boiling from Hank Ball's pores as he cupped his fingers around a

cigarette and, his lips hidden, spoke to Dusty Trail in a whisper as he lighted up:

"Doc's in a jam an' don't know it. He's got no way of knowin' this crew has him spotted for a star-toter."

Dusty, bending close while Hank held his match to the end of his nickel cigar, whispered back:

"We can't show our hand in this mob, son. Doc must know what he's doin'."

The outlaw crew had its full attention on Joe Knight.

"Stevens," they heard their leader say softly, "you've already proved you are a dead game hombre. Come over to the house and sign my pay-roll book, and consider yourself a Knifegash rider."

As Reese dismounted to join Knight, the syndicate boss turned to his men with a gesture of dismissal.

"We won't leave the ranch until dark, men. Get your guns and saddle gear ready. . . . Come on, Stevens."

Hank and Dusty stood helplessly by as they saw their field chief head toward the ranchhouse, Joe Knight matching his stride.

Reese was ground-tying his Shamrock-branded pony at the front gate when he noted that Joe Knight stepped behind him as he motioned him up the path.

For a range baron of Knight's arrogance, this touch of courtesy did not ring true. On the other hand, Reese could not afford to arouse the rancher's suspicions by refusing to show his back to Knight at this juncture.

Climbing the porch steps, the CPA man stepped into the semi-darkness of the big J-K Connected living room, with Knight at his heels. Reese's raking glance swept the room, ostensibly admiring the Navajo rugs, the heads of mounted game adoring the knotty-pine walls, the magnificent lava rock fireplace. Actually, he was sizing up the doors opening on this big room, hoping he might hear the voice of Marcia Malone.

Removing his Stetson, Reese lowered the big ten-gallon headgear with an innocent gesture. He turned to face Joe Knight, who was swinging shut the big redwood-paneled door.

Under cover of the sombrero, Steve Reese slipped a Colt .45 from holster with his left hand and, without warning, whipped his hat aside to confront Knight with the leveled muzzle of his six-shooter. By no flicker of an eyelash did Joe Knight betray any surprise at this hostile move. But his lips twisted into a taut line of chagrin, for his own hand had been traveling toward his gun the instant before.

"You work fast, Reese."

THE CPA man's brow formed a quick notch of surprise as he heard himself addressed by his right name, but his voice showed none.

"I won't bother to deny I am Steve Reese, not Doc Stevens," he said quietly, as Joe Knight raised his arms before the threat of his gun drop. "How did you find out?"

[*Turn page*]

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The Knifegash boss showed his even white teeth in a grin.

"I've known it since you hit town, Reese."

The lawman eared back his gunhammer to full cock, thinking, "There must be a Knifegash spy planted in Copeland's bunch." Aloud, he said tersely, "All right, Knight. I'll give you to the count of five to tell me where you've got the girl."

Knight laughed softly as Reese started counting.

At "three," the rancher said unperturbedly, "I don't think you'll pull that trigger, Reese. If you do, you'll never see Marcia Malone alive."

Reese stopped counting. His bluff had failed. Knight was using the girl as a hostage to save his own hide.

"I know you've got her somewhere on this ranch, Knight. I don't intend to leave without her. You see"—Reese played his ace— "I saw you shoot her father. You'll hang for that, Knight."

It was Joe Knight's turn to show surprise, and he did, but only momentarily.

"Oh, I bushwhacked the old man," he admitted carelessly, "But you'll never prove that in court, Reese."

The CPA man stepped forward, reaching out to take Knight's six-gun out of holster.

"You'll lead me to Marcia," he said, "or I'll gun-whip you and search this house myself."

At that instant a jangle of breaking glass broke through Reese's tense concentration, and he jerked his head around. He was covered by the big bore of a Springfield .45-70, thrust through the broken pane of a front window. Squinting down the sights of that rifle was the grinning visage of the Knifegash ramrod, Rickaree Ames.

"Drop your hardware, star man!" came Ames' command through the fractured opening in the glass. "This blunderbus can tear a hole clean through you."

Reese shrugged, knowing he was in an impossible situation. He felt an instant's surprise that Ames had given him this much of a chance. Without comment, he dropped his own and Knight's guns to the coyote-pelt rug at his feet.

Ames held his rifle on Reese as Knight stepped forward and stooped to retrieve the two guns. Then he removed Reese's second Colt from holster.

"All right—turn around and head for the open door yonder," Joe Knight said softly. "I'll take you to Marcia Malone."

Despair coursed through Steve Reese as he turned and headed for the door his captor had indicated. Rickaree Ames joined the Knifegash boss as they headed down a corridor to where a rear door of the ranchhouse opened on the back yard.

From this direction, it was impossible for Hank and Dusty to see their field chief's predicament. Reese felt Knight's guns prod him toward the back gate and head him down a winding path which snaked off into the perpetual twilight of the pine forest.

Five minutes' walk brought Reese and the two gunmen to the sod-covered root cellar. Here, Ames rode herd on Reese while Joe Knight opened the padlock and pulled the thick slab door back on its heavy iron hinges.

In the darkness of the cellar, Steve Reese saw Marcia Malone, bound hand and foot with rawhide rope but apparently unhurt. She was sitting on a sack of potatoes. The girl's luminous eyes went round with horror as she recognized Knight's prisoner.

Reese grinned ruefully as he stepped down into the cellar, Ames' .45-70 barrel prodding his spine.

"Thought you might like some company, ma'am," the CPA operative said casually. "But it looks like I overplayed my hand."

Without warning, Ames lifted up his Springfield and smashed the octagonal muzzle against the base of Reese's skull. Without a sound, the CPA man slumped in his tracks, falling across Marcia's feet.

"We're still waiting for Cliff Copeland to show up," Joe Knight said to

the horrified girl. "When Reese rallies around, tell him there's no use trying to get out of this cellar. The walls are two-foot-thick granite and there's a sheet-iron roof under that sod."

MARCIA, white-faced and trembling now, made no answer as Knight slammed the door shut and clicked the padlock through its hasp.

"This Steve Reese isn't as bright as his advance advertising would lead us to believe, Rick," chuckled Knight, as he and his foreman headed back through the forest. "Of course, though, if Gill Espey hadn't tipped us off that he was a Johnny Lawman, his bluff might have worked."

"What do you aim to do with Reese, Boss?" Ames said curiously.

Knight shrugged. "Use him for bargaining bait when Copeland shows up, hunting for the girl. After we've finished our negotiations, I think Copeland will mysteriously disappear—along with Reese and Copeland's lady friend. They all know too much to let them live, Rick. . . ."

When the Knifegash crew assembled at the cookhouse at noon, Hank Ball and Dusty Trail noticed with alarm that Reese had not returned from the main ranchhouse. At the conclusion of the mid-day meal, most of the outlaws returned to the bunkhouse to loaf, resting up for the raid scheduled to wipe out the valley ranchers in a few hours, which was scheduled that night.

"Didn't hear any shooting," Hank Ball said to his worried partner when they met out by the corral. "Reckon we ought to have a look in Knight's hogan and see what's keepin' Doc?"

Dusty bit savagely on his stogie.

"I got a hunch, Hank. We know that Doc went off with Knight, not knowin' that Knight was wise to him being a star-toter. I got a hunch that Knight threw a gun on Doc and marched him over to that spring house where he's holdin' that girl prisoner."

Hank's eyes showed his extreme misery. He groaned. "And a couple of new-hired hands like us wouldn't be able to drift off on a manhunt without attractin' attention. But one thing's sure, Dusty—before this outfit rides out tonight, we go to get Marcia out of there!"

A made-to-order opportunity to do some scouting away from the rest of the crew came at two o'clock, when the word was passed around the bunkhouse that Knight had given the men the afternoon off. A swimming party was scheduled at the small lake at the edge of the mesa, a body of water fed by melting snows from the upper peaks.

Hank and Dusty aroused no suspicions when they elected to remain in their bunks, declaring that they were dry-land buckaroos with a healthy fear of water and never had learned to swim.

Shortly they found themselves alone in the J-K Connected bunkhouse. The entire crew, including the foreman and Joe Knight himself, headed over to the swimming hole for an hour's respite from the severe heat.

"This is the first break of luck that's come our way," commented Hank Ball, buckling on his gun harness. He squinted out the bunkhouse window to where the Knifegash punchers were disporting themselves at the lake, two hundred yards distant. "But we can't be sure Knight ain't havin' us watched, Dusty. I think one of us better stay here and give a signal in case trouble breaks while the other is over at that spring house."

They cut a deck of cards to see which of the two would head out on the mission to rescue Marcia. Dusty, to his profound disgust, drew the low card and had to remain at the bunkhouse to keep an eye on the swimmers.

CHAPTER XI

Unexpected News

HANK BALL strolled out to the corral, roped a horse for Marcia out of the cavvy and saddled it. Then, with the barns masking what he was up to from the frollicking men out at the swimming hole, he headed for the blacksmith shop.

There the redhead obtained a maul and cold chisel, and made his way at once to the root cellar where Marcia Malone was being held prisoner.

Muffling the chisel with a pad of gunnysacking, Hank knocked the padlock hasp off the door with a dozen muffled blows, fairly certain that he had not made noise enough to carry to the ears of Joe Knight and his crew. Then, opening the heavy log door, Hank Ball grinned with relief as he caught sight of Marcia and—Steve Reese!

Reese, having recovered consciousness, had untied the girl's bonds. But during the past hour the two prisoners had found no possible way of getting out of the rock-walled cellar.

"Here's the set-up, Doc," Hank Ball said crisply. "Knifegash is pullin' off a raid up and down Rawhide Valley tonight, burnin' out the small-tally outfits to force their owners into line. Startin' with Copeland's Twin C!"

Steve Reese, his head still throbbing with pain from the brutal gun-clubbing, helped Hank lead the girl up the cellar steps.

"There's enough time for Marcia and me to round up the valley ranchers and meet the Knifegash's raiders when they come," he said hoarsely. "Right now, I've got to get her to where Cliff is waiting. I can't risk Copeland getting panicky and showing up here on the J-K Connected."

Hank blushed furiously as Marcia kissed him on the cheek before she swung aboard the waiting horse. Steve Reese mounted behind the cantle.

"You and Dusty keep playing along as members of Knight's crew," Reese said to Hank. "It'll come in handy having you riding with them. You can break up their attack from the rear."

The redhead grinned. "See you later tonight," he said, and watched Steve Reese and Marcia Malone, riding double on a borrowed Knifegash mount, vanish in the timber.

Hank turned back to the empty root cellar and set about spiking the damaged hasp back into the door frame, to cover up the fact that it had been tampered with. When he finished, the big padlock was in position and he was convinced that no one glancing at the door would be aware that anything unusual had happened.

The redhead was in rare good spirits as he hurried back to the bunkhouse to report the success of his mission to Dusty Trail. He found the chunky operative squatting beside the bunkhouse window, keeping an eye on the swimmers at the lake.

"Well, Doc and Marcia are on their way," Hank said, and repeated what Reese had told him concerning his capture by Knight. "Looks like the Knifegash will run into a surprise when they hit Copeland's ranch tonight."

Trail stretched out on his bunk and lit up another foul-smelling stogie.

"Things are goin' too smooth," he said pessimistically. "I ain't so sure it was a good idea, Doc tellin' us to stick with Knight's bunch tonight."

Hank unbuckled his gun harness and lay down on the bunk beside Dusty's.

"If Knight found us missing when he got back from his swim, he'd prob'ly call off the raid till he was sure what was up," he pointed out. "What we got to hope for is that Knight don't take a pasear over to his root cellar and find out that Doc and the girl have flew the coop."

Dusty stirred uneasily on his bunk,

sending dense fumes of tobacco smoke wafting around Hank's nose.

"He'd be purty sure we let 'em loose, all right," Dusty agreed. "Us bein' the only ones left behind. Especially when a horse turns up missin' from the corral."

AN HOUR later, when the roistering cowpunchers returned from their refreshing swim, they found Hank and Dusty snoring in their bunks.

Joe Knight, pausing for a few words with his foreman, announced that he was going to the ranchhouse to take a nap before supper. The raiders would not saddle up and leave the J-K Connected until dark, around eight o'clock. With supper at six, that would give the crew plenty of time to prepare for their pillaging trek into Rawhide Valley.

When six o'clock came, Joe Knight came down to the crew's chuck shack to eat with his men and discuss the details of the coming raid. To the infinite relief of Hank and Dusty, the Knifegash boss appeared completely at ease. It was obvious that Knight had not paid a visit to the root cellar back in the timber, and therefore was still in ignorance concerning the escape of his two prisoners.

The two CPA men got further confirmation of this when they heard Knight telling his foreman:

"I think we'd better leave a couple of men behind tonight, just in case Copeland sneaks in, hunting for his girl. Can't savvy why Cliff hasn't showed up before now."

The Knifegash crew wolfed their food in silence, suspense making an electric undercurrent in the mess hall. Each man knew he might not live to see tomorrow's dawn. The excitement of the coming raid laid its pressure on every one of them.

When the Chinese cook was serving dessert, two riders appeared, coming up from the Summit Rock road. The Chihuahua Kid, stepping to the door to size them up, turned and said to Knight:

"It's the sheriff and Tom Roebuck, Boss."

Hank and Dusty, seated at opposite sides of the long table, eyed each other curiously. They realized that the Summit Rock sheriff was in league with Knight's owlhoot operations, but was it possible that Duane McCleemont had the gall to ride on tonight's raid of the summer graze ranches along Rawhide River?

Tom Roebuck, they recalled, was the Index Saloon barfly who had given Steve Reese his original information concerning the sheriff's illegal connection with the Knifegash Syndicate. Why that drunken bum had accompanied McCleemont out to Knight's ranch this evening they could not imagine.

Joe Knight shoved back his chair and headed out of the cook shack to where McCleemont and the barfly were dismounting at a tie-rack.

"Wipe that worried look off'n your face, Sheriff!" greeted Knight, shaking hands with the Summit Rock lawman. "Steve Reese is out of the way. I've got him locked up right here on the ranch. And tonight's the big night. By tomorrow there won't be any opposition left down in the valley."

Sheriff McCleemont grunted. "You won't feel so foxy when you hear what Roebuck's got to report, Joe . . . Go ahead, Tom. Tell him what you told me this afternoon."

Knight turned questioning eyes on the old derelict from the Index Saloon. Roebuck was a broken-down cowpuncher whom Knight kept on his pay-roll because Roebuck often picked up information at saloon bars which Knight found it profitable to know.

"Well," Roebuck said in his whining nasal voice, "it's about old Ben Carter's killin', Mr. Knight. The sheriff tells me you hired the two strangers who say they killed Carter in the Timberline Stable last night."

Knight nodded, scowling.

"Go on," he prompted.

ROEBUCK scratched his ear nervously, shooting a side glance at

the sheriff.

"Well," he continued hesitantly, "you know how I bed down in the hayloft at the Timberline barn of nights, Mr. Knight? Last night I was sleepin' when I was waked up pronto-like by an argument down in the stable runway. I crawled over to the trap-door where they fork down hay—"

"Hurry it along, Tom!" rasped the sheriff impatiently.

"Well," the barfly whined, "there was old man Carter, with a lantern. There was an hombre saddlin' up Carter's black hoss, and old Ben was accusin' him of stealin' the black."

"What hombre?" Joe Knight interrupted.

Roebuck shrugged. "You got me there, Mr. Knight. A saddle bum I hadn't seen before, except playin' poker at the Warbonnet Casino t'other day. Anyhow, Carter socked this saddle bum, and the saddle bum socked Carter back. Carter went sprawlin', and the saddle bum whips out a knife and heaves it at Carter."

Joe Knight's mouth clamped into a harsh line. "So Hank and Dusty didn't kill Ben Carter!"

Tom Roebuck shook his head. "Nope. Carter hauls out a gun and shoots this saddle bum dead. I seen it all happen from the hayloft trap-door, Mr. Knight."

Sheriff McCleemont picked up the narrative.

"Here's what you ought to know, Joe. Right after Carter guns this knife-slinger, who should show up but this Steve Reese hombre. Roebuck heard Reese ask Carter if you were back of this ruckus, and with his dyin' breath, Carter said you weren't, so far as he knew—said the knife-slinger was a stranger to him."

Tom Roebuck's voice took on a wheedling tone. "Reese, he blowed out the lantern then, but in the darkness I could hear him loadin' the dead saddle bum onto Carter's black mount. Next thing I knowed, Reese was leadin' him out the back way."

"What did Reese do with the dead man?" demanded Knight.

Sheriff McCleemont chuckled. "Roebuck had a bottle with him and took a snort which put him to sleep for the rest of the night. This afternoon, when Roebuck told me what happened, I did a little scoutin'. Saw where Reese led Carter's horse out toward the valley. I found this saddle bum's carcass down in a ravine, shot through the head. Which proves this ain't a trumped-up story Roebuck dreamed up out of a whisky bottle, Joe."

CHAPTER XII

Accused

FOR a long moment, Joe Knight was wholly silent, picking over this tangled-up story in his mind.

"That message namin' a fat feller and a red-headed waddy as Carter's killers," the sheriff went on, "must have been chucked through my window by this Steve Reese hombre, I figger. I thought you ought to know, Joe. Especially seeing as how you hired a couple of jaspers who rode out to your ranch last night claimin' they was runnin' away after knifin' Carter."

Knight reached in his pocket and pulled out a roll of bills. Pealing off a double sawbuck, he handed it to Tom Roebuck.

"Good work, Tom," Knight said. "The thing I've still got to figure out is why Hank and Dusty claimed they'd done a killing they hadn't." Suddenly a sharp look came into his agate eyes. "Sheriff," he said, "Steve Reese is a Cattlemen's Protective Association man. If he had a hand in sending those two buckaroos out here under false colors, then Hank and Dusty must be CPA operatives, too! Workin' with Reese, under cover. It

adds up, don't it?"

The sheriff hitched his gun belt. "Easy way to find out," he said grimly, "if those two hairpins are still around."

Knight swung on his heel, heading back toward the cookhouse.

"You and Roebuck wait here," the Knifegash boss said. "We'll get to the bottom of this."

Entering the chuckhouse, Joe Knight walked over to whisper something in the Chihuahua Kid's ear. The cavvy wrangler climbed off the bench and strolled along the table toward the hat rack, halting in the vicinity where Hank Ball, his back to the Kid, was busy with coffee and apple pie.

Moving unhurriedly, Joe Knight rounded the end of the table. Brushing a hand across Rickaree Ames' shoulder he bent to whisper something in the foreman's ear. Then continuing on around the table, Joe Knight came to a halt immediately behind Dusty Trail's massive back.

"Men," the Knifegash boss said casually. "I've got a little speech to make. The last one before we take off on tonight's raid. I want your attention."

Across the room, the Chihuahua Kid had slipped a six-gun out of holster, holding it behind his back out of Dusty Trail's line of vision. He had moved directly behind Hank Ball now, his black eyes fixed on Joe Knight.

"You all know that we managed to capture Steve Reese this afternoon, without too much trouble, thanks to Gill Espey tipping us off that he was a CPA man," Joe Knight said sharply. "Something has been called to my attention which tells me that Reese is a thorough worker. He has gone so far as to plant a pair of range detectives right in our midst."

As his words left his lips Knight had pulled a Colt .45 from leather and thrust the cold metal tip of the gun barrel against the perspiring nape of Dusty Trail's thick neck.

Across the table Hank Ball felt a similar pressure from the Chihuahua Kid's gun, reaming between his shoulder blades.

The Knifegash crewmen stared aghast.

"We may be mistaken in Hank and Dusty being star toters," Joe Knight went on sternly, "but we can't take any chances. These two hombres are not riding with us tonight. Instead, I've got an idea they'll be dancing at the end of a hangrope before long."

* * * * *

WHEN Steve Reese and Marcia Malone, riding double, appeared out of the nearby underbrush, Cliff Copeland was waiting on the ridge overlooking the J-K Connected.

They were tears of relief and thankfulness now that glistened in the young Twin C rancher's eyes as the girl slipped from stirrups to fall into his arms. He crushed her to him, his lips clinging, oblivious to the CPA man's presence. Reese finally pulled them back to reality with a discreet cough.

"Miss Malone can tell you what happened to us, Cliff," he said, "on your way back to the valley. There's a lot to be done before sunset."

Copeland and the girl turned to stare at him.

"You'll be going with us, won't you?" Marcia asked anxiously.

Reese shook his head. "My place is with Hank and Dusty when the big blowoff comes tonight. I'm going to keep an eye on Knight's ranch and grab myself a horse after his riders leave."

Copeland listened attentively as Reese passed on Hank Ball's information concerning the Knifegash's plans for an all-out raid on the valley outfits.

"You and Miss Malone must reach every man you can trust, have them on hand at your spread before midnight," Reese said swiftly. "That's where the Knifegash will strike first. I'll be on hand with my men to catch those night riders in a crossfire. By sunup tomorrow, I have hopes that Joe Knight's grip on your summer graze will be smashed forever."

Copeland nodded, grinning.

"And Cliff," Reese went on, "you should know that your neighbor, Gill Espey, is a traitor to the rest of you small ranchers. As you pass Lazy E it may be a good idea to take Espey into custody. Don't give him a chance to tip off Knight concerning our counter plans. Espey is a Knifegash spy."

Copeland swore under his breath, unable to realize fully that one of his Rawhide River neighbors had been in league with the enemy. It was stunning news.

He lost no time, however. Quickly he and Marcia disappeared down the slope, heading back toward the valley. The outcome of tonight's sensational coup would depend on the speed with which this young couple rallied the small-tally ranchers between now and midnight. And both knew it.

Hunger and exhaustion made themselves felt on Reese now, though he was aware that his own position was perilous in the extreme. Should his escape become known and Knight put trackers combing the brush in search of him and Marcia there was little chance that he could avoid them.

Searching out a brush-choked coulee midway down the ridge slope toward the J-K Connected, Reese burrowed into the brush and stretched out on a cushioning bed of sphagnum moss, trusting to his long-trained instincts to awaken him at dusk. Thrust through the waistband of his levis was a six-gun which Cliff Copeland had loaned him to replace those taken by Joe Knight this morning. He had a handful of extra ammunition in his chaps pocket.

Steve Reese was asleep almost immediately. He did not awaken until the clangor of the Knifegash triangle, summoning Knight's crew to supper, went echoing through the pines. . . .

Down in the Knifegash chuckhouse, pandemonium broke loose as Hank Ball and Dusty Trail came to their feet, helpless with guns pushing against their backs. Of how their secret had leaked out, neither waddy had any inkling. They knew only that it was somehow tied up with the arrival of Sheriff McCleemont and Tom Roebuck from Summit Rock.

"I never heard such a dang-fool idea, boys," Dusty Trail said, still jovially, even knowing that he and Hank Ball were in the most dangerous predicament of their lives. "What makes you think we're CPA star toters?"

The booming voice of Sheriff Duane McCleemont, who stalked through the chuckhouse door, answered Dusty's attempt at a bluff.

"You two hombres claimed you killed Ben Carter, didn't you?" snarled the Summit Rock lawman, grinning maliciously.

DUSTY TRAIL tore his glance off the sheriff's star and twisted around to face Joe Knight.

"You doublecrossed us!" the roly-poly cowpuncher said in feigned despair. "You sent for the sheriff to turn us in!"

Knight shook his head.

"Time to quite bluffing, Dusty. I didn't send for the sheriff. But he's got evidence that you didn't do that killing. Sheriff, bring Tom in."

Hank and Dusty were without their guns now. The entire Knifegash crew had come to its feet, hemming in the two prisoners like a wolf pack closing in on crippled stags.

All eyes turned toward the door, where the sorry-looking figure of Tom Roebuck, the drunkard from Summit Rock, shuffled in to stand alongside the sheriff.

"I never seen these buskies before," Roebuck said, pointing a skinny finger at Hank and Dusty, "but I sure as shootin' know they didn't cash in old Carter's chips. I seen that knifin'—an' it was done by a drifter whose name I can't tell you."

Sheriff McCleemont spoke to the crowd.

"Ben Carter was knifed by a feller whose body I found in a canyon a mile

north of town this afternoon. From papers on his body, I found out that character was named Pete Larbuck, and was from Tonto Basin, Arizona Territory."

Dusty Trail's drowsy insouciance dropped from him like a cloak in this instant. With deceptive speed for so heavy a man, he lunged at Joe Knight, batting the six-gun from the rancher's hand.

In Dusty's brain was but one purpose. He knew he was done for, and his one hope was to take Joe Knight with him. But the odds were insurmountable. Dusty did not get his chance to carry through his surprise attack and snatch up Knight's fallen gun.

Sam Bozeman, who had been seated at Dusty's left, drove a hard kick to Dusty's middle. Then as Dusty was fighting off the shock-waves of pure agony, he felt a gun butt clip him behind the ear. He fell forward at Knight's feet, his senses reeling.

Squatting down, the Knifegash boss sent searching fingers over Dusty Trail's body. After a little fumbling from a secret compartment inside Dusty's left bootleg, Joe Knight lifted his hand to show the crew a glittering metal star.

"A Cattlemen's Protective Association badge, boys," Joe Knight chuckled triumphantly. "Dusty is a range detective in disguise, or was. Chihuahua, you and the boys give Hank a fine-tooth combing and see if he's carrying one of these knick-knacks."

ZORRO
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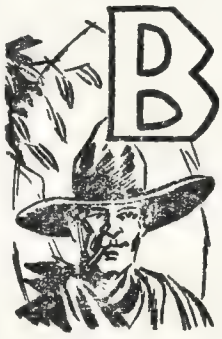
CHAPTER XIII

Lynch Party



BALI made no effort at resistance. It was impossible. The Chihuahua Kid's gun was still pushing against his shoulder blades. Iron-muscled fingers held his wrists in a viselike lock.

It was but a matter of moments before Hank's law badge came to light, hidden in his boot as Dusty's had been.

"Get ropes," Knight ordered, "and hog-tie these buscaderos. They've worked their last case. I reckon we'll be dumping them in the same grave with their boss, Steve Reese."

The next few breaths of time were a nightmare for the two CPA men. Their arms were trussed behind their backs with lariats, and they were taken out in front of the chuckhouse, where sundown glare was fast fading behind the Rocky Mountain peaks.

"What you want done with these hombres, Boss?" inquired Rickaree Ames. "Want 'em locked up in the root cellar with Reese and the Malone girl?"

Suspense tautened the nerves of the two prisoners as they waited for Knight's answer. Up to now, the Knifegash boss had been in ignorance of his prisoners' escape from the root cellar. If he discovered that Hank and Dusty had set Reese and the girl free, it would probably anger him to the extent of ordering them slowly tortured to death. Equally bad, it would probably mean that Knight would cancel tonight's raid on the valley, with Reese having a chance to warn the Rawhide River ranch owners.

Joe Knight glanced up at the fast-darkening sky and consulted the big silver watch he took from his pocket.

"We've flushed three CPA men out

of cover so far today," the range baron said. "There's no way of knowing how many more of 'em are skulkin' around. I guess the root cellar will be the best place for these two, at that."

Despair put its chill on the prisoners' veins as they saw Knight hand over the root cellar key to the sheriff. Turning to his waiting men, Knight said:

"Saddle up, boys. We've got to get on our way. The sooner we wipe out all opposition, the better."

Disappointment showed on the sadistic faces of the Knifegash crew. Those brutal men had been anticipating a Roman holiday in connection with Knight's speedy vengeance on the two lawmen.

"Don't worry, boys." Knight laughed, reading their reaction. "When we get back, we'll have us a three-way hanging bee—might even string Marcia Malone up, too, while we're at it. Disposing of them right now would delay us."

When the Knifegash riders had trooped off toward the corrals to saddle up, Knight walked over to where the sheriff and old Tom Roebuck were riding herd on their prisoners.

"I was just talking for the boys' benefit, Sheriff," the Knifegash boss whispered. "I'm playing a desperate game here, and I can't afford to lynch these CPA men in front of witnesses. Too much chance of one of them gunslingers turning traitor some day, to save his own hide, and testifying in court that I killed three lawmen. I want Hank and Dusty disposed of before we get back to the ranch. String 'em up and get 'em buried before morning."

Hank and Dusty, helpless in their bonds, saw McCleemont's eyes light up with fiendish anticipation.

"I see your point, Joe," the renegade lawman agreed. "Always dangerous to have witnesses—you never know how far to trust a man. This pair will be six foot under when you get back from the raid."

"They'll want to know what happened to these detectives, Mr. Knight—" Roebuck began querulously.

The sheriff shrugged. "We'll say they escaped, that's all. They won't be seen again. That's all that matters. Nobody'll be able to prove we strung 'em up."

After a few more words of instructions, Joe Knight galloped off into the gathering darkness, followed by his gunhung crew. They carried oil-soaked gunnysacks, bottles of kerosene, and other materials for burning down barns and ranchhouses.

"Light a shuck over to the bunkhouse, Tom," ordered the sheriff, "and fetch back a pair of lass' ropes. Reckon that cottonwood over by the horse troughs will make a good hangtree."

THE two CPA men were helpless to resist as the doublecrossing Summit Rock lawman marched them at gun's point over to the J-K Connected watering troughs, over which a gnarled cottonwood spread its twisted branches. An orange-colored full moon was mounting the eastern sky, resembling a Chinese lantern caught in the heavy foliage of the cottonwood.

Tom Roebuck came hobbling back from the bunkhouse, a coil of hemp lariat over either arm. With deft fingers, Summit Rock's sheriff fashioned a pair of five-roll hangman's knots, allowing the old derelict to slip the lethal nooses over the heads of the two CPA operatives.

"Now you fellers climb up on the edge of the trough here and stand side by side," McCleemont ordered, gesturing with his gun muzzle. "If you get boogery and try a break, all it'll get you is a slug in the middle. A man takes a long time to die, when he's shot like that."

Hank Ball and Dusty Trail each set a boot sole on the thick wooden rim of the brimming trough and, with their captors giving them a boost from the rear, clambered up on the edge of the trough.

Roebuck cast the hangropes over a low-hanging cottonwood limb and scuttled around beyond the water trough to

pull up the slack and tie the reatas around the tree trunk. McCleemont holstered his gun and squatted down in the mud to pull a wooden plug from the bottom of the trough. A jet of water gushed out, immediately lowering the level of the water in the trough.

"Get the idea, boys?" chuckled the Summit Rock sheriff. "Before this trough is empty, your weight will tip the trough over and leave you dancin' your last jig in thin air. You'll both have time to say yore prayers while the water's drainin' out. I reckon you got five minutes at the most before enough water's emptied to make your weight upset the trough."

With hangknots girdling their throats and their arms tied securely behind their backs, Hank and Dusty found it no small feat to maintain their equilibrium on the narrow edge of the water trough, even with the weight of three

hundred gallons of water to hold the big tank steady under them. A slip would mean death by slow strangulation. It required a considerable drop for a hangman's knot to break a man's neck and mercifully snuff out his life on the instant.

The two men found themselves staring at the lowering water line with a morbid fascination. A miniature lake was spreading across the ground as the trough emptied in a fountaining gush from the drainage hole the sheriff had opened.

When their combined weight offset the weight of the water remaining in the trough, nothing could prevent the big wooden tank from upsetting, leaving them to kick out their lives under the cottonwood limb. Judging from the rapidity with which the water level was decreasing on the moss-slimed sides of the tank, it was doubtful if they had the five-minute maximum left which McCleemont had estimated.

McCleemont climbed up to the tailgate of a Conestoga wagon which was near the troughs, to have a grand-stand seat at the macabre spectacle. Tom Roebuck, as obedient as a whipped pup, shuffled off to the blacksmith shop to obtain a couple of shovels from the tool racks for grave-digging, acting on the sheriff's orders.

It was a nerve-wracking ordeal for the CPA men, listening to the sluicing waters gush through the drainage hole in the bottom of the tank, knowing that every ounce of escaping water brought doom that many seconds closer.

McCleemont's eyes searched the faces of his two lynch victims, hoping to see signs of cracking. But both stood motionless, shoulders touching, stubbornly refusing to give the sheriff the satisfaction of seeing fear in their faces.

The water level had declined a good eight inches and the two lynch rope victims could feel their weight beginning to tilt the wooden trough slightly when an interruption came from an unexpected quarter.

ACROSS the moon-drenched yard, in the direction of the stone-walled hay barn, a steely voice lashed through the taut quiet:

"You're covered, Sheriff! Get your hands up!"

It was the voice of Steve Reese!

From their position on the edge of the wooden tank, neither of Reese's lieutenants could twist his head around to stare in the direction of their field chief, without losing their balance on the slippery edge of the tank. Sheriff McCleemont, however, jerked his head around to stare at the open maw of the

barn from whence the voice had come.

He saw no trace of the speaker. But the moon rays struck the blued gunmetal of a six-gun thrust out of shadow.

With a hoarse bellow of fear, the renegade lawman swung his legs over the wagon's tail-gate and got to his feet, shielded from the waist down by the Conestoga's high plank sides. His arms groped to the level of his Stetson brim as he saw Stephen Reese step out of the barn doorway, six-gun jutting at waist height.

"Doc!" shouted Hank Ball, desperation catching his throat. "Make it fast, pard—we're due to stretch hemp before the water empties out of this trough we're standin' on!"

Reese glanced quickly around. He had been a hundred yards away, hiding in the edge of the forest, when the Knifegash riders had left the ranch. He had seen that his partners were in some predicament, but had been too far away to realize they were in extreme danger.

NOW, seeing the water spilling like quicksilver out of the spout in the trough's side, he understood the full gravity of the situation.

"Jump out of that wagon box, Sheriff!" Reese shouted at the motionless McCleemont. "Get that plug back into the trough—pronto!"

With a cold, jeering laugh, Duane McCleemont flung himself flat in the bed of the Conestoga. Reese's six-gun blasted like thunder, but only tore the Stetson off the sheriff's head as he vanished out of sight under the box sides of the big prairie schooner.

In the space of a heart-beat, McCleemont had altered the situation to his own advantage. He now had solid two-inch hickory planks between him and Reese's gun. Reese was in the open, on his way across the moonlit ground.

Squinting through a knot-hole in the side of the wagon, McCleemont got Reese's range. Thrusting his Colt .45 through the knot-hole he triggered a shot at the oncoming Reese.

CHAPTER XIV

Ordeal by Moonlight

EVEN with such blind aiming, McCleemont's slug whistled less than an inch away from Steve Reese's face, the air-whip of the bullet's passage as painful as a slap on the cheek. With a yell of desperation, Reese leaped back into the sheltering blackness of the barn.

Fifty feet separated him from the water trough where Hank and Dusty stood helpless. To his panicked imagination, the water gushing from the trough was like blood spurting from a wounded artery.

That fifty feet was covered by McCleemont's gun from the elevated barricade of the Conestoga wagon. It would be sheer suicide for Reese to sprint across the distance and jam the wooden stopper in the water trough.

"Don't risk it, Doc!" Dusty Trail choked out. The stogie to which he had clung doggedly even in the face of death dropped from his lips and hit the water with a brief hiss. "You couldn't make it here to help us now!"

Sheriff McCleemont's throaty laughter came raucously from the bed of the Conestoga. He had the whip hand. Just a few minutes more now and Reese would be a helpless witness to the upsetting of the water trough, would see his friends choke to death before his eyes.

From the darkness of the barn, Reese drove a shot at the wagon box, on the off chance that his slug would penetrate the thick hardwood planks and tally the sheriff. Instead, he heard his bullet strike a bolt head and carom off into the cottonwood foliage overhead.

In moments of extreme peril, Reese's keen brain always functioned at its best. He knew McCleemont could cut him

down if he showed himself in the moonlight. He likewise knew that every second counted now, if his two lieutenants were to be spared the grisly doom that awaited them.

And there was still another factor working against Reese in this desperate situation. Tom Roebuck. The old drunkard packed a gun. At the moment he was in the blacksmith shop, but he must have heard the shots.

Knowing that this must be a race with death, Reese sprinted through the barn and out through the rear. Holstering his gun, he clambered up the pole rails of a corral and reached for the eave rafters of the barn. Then he was clawing his way up onto the roof, which sloped at a steep angle to the ridge pole.

Clinging to whatever purchase his fingers could find, Reese inched his way up the slippery shingles. After what seemed like an eternity, he gained the ridge pole and flattened himself along it like a whiptail lizard.

Panting heavily with the exertion of his fast climb, Reese scanned the ranch yard. He saw no sign of Tom Roebuck, but the old drunkard might even now have him in his gun sights. Roebuck could pick Reese off that lofty barn roof like a sitting duck.

Lying close to the ridgepole, silhouetted by the moon now, Reese crawled along the roof toward the front end of the barn, the night wind cool on his fevered cheeks. He hoped more fervently than he had ever hoped for anything in his life that the sheriff, hidden in the Conestoga wagon, would not hear him moving across the peak of the barn.

Reese gained the end of the barn. He was on a level with the top of the forty-foot cottonwood now. But its overhanging branches shut off his view of the water trough, so that he could not tell whether the tank had upset, dropping Hank and Dusty to their deaths.

From his lofty perch, Reese now could look down into the box of the prairie schooner. He saw the sheriff sprawled down there, a gun in either hand, squinting through the knot-hole toward the barn door where the killer lawman assumed Reese to be.

DRAWING his Colt, Reese sent his sharp call down to the unsuspecting sheriff:

"Get going, McCleemont! This is your last chance!"

The sheriff hauled himself to a kneeling position, startled by the voice coming from out of the sky. He glanced up—to see the wide-shouldered figure of the CPA field chief limned against the moonlit sky.

With a berserk yell, McCleemont whipped up his gun for a fast shot at the man who had out-guessed him.

The shot missed. And McCleemont did not get his chance to correct his aim.

With cold precision, Reese steadied his six-gun barrel on the edge of the shingles and squeezed trigger, well knowing all that depended on this shot. The bullet caught Duane McCleemont between the eyes. The sheriff of Summit Rock jerked back, then slumped limply into the wagon box.

"Hank—Dusty—I'm coming right down!" Reese yelled, and waves of relief went through him as he heard Dusty Trail's panting voice answer him:

"Better hurry, Doc. This trough's beginnin' to teeter under us!"

There was no time to crawl back the way he had come. Reese flung himself down the slope of the roof, gambling against the risk of broken bones when he plummeted over the edge of the roof. His body gained momentum as he tobogganed down the warped shingles. There was no slowing down his skidding progress before he was catapulting through space from the eaves, twelve feet above the ground.

A pile of rusting machinery was stacked against the barn, but providentially the very speed of his flight carried Reese over that dangerous obstacle. He landed heavily on the ground, cushioning his shock by going into a

series of somersaults, in the manner of a professonal tumbler.

Dazed and breathless, Reese came to his feet in a cloud of dust and started running toward the water trough beneath the cottonwood. Even as he raced past the Conestoga where the dead sheriff lay, Reese saw the nearly-empty trough tilt dangerously. He saw the two range detectives buckle their knees in a frantic effort to maintain their precarious balance.

With clock-ticks to spare, Reese flung himself at the teetering wooden tank and gently shoved it back to level, using his shoulders to help brace Hank and Dusty's boots.

Gasping for breath, Reese looked up at the perspiring faces of his partners. Then, bracing his knees against the trough to keep it plumb, Reese took a knife from his chaps pocket and reached up to slash Hank Ball's bonds asunder.

His hands freed, the red-headed detective was able to reach up and grip the hangrope. Even if his feet slipped out from under him now, he was safe from a broken neck.

As swiftly, Reese cut the ropes binding Dusty's thick wrists behind his back, then the roly-poly range rider was following Hank's example by reaching up to seize the hangrope.

"Just chin yourself, boys," panted Reese, "while I take care of those lynch ropes for you."

Staggering through the mud puddle surrounding the water trough, the CPA field chief made his way to the bole of the cottonwood. Not bothering to untie the hangropes, he slashed each of the reatas in two with his razor-edged knife.

Hank and Dusty half-fell, half-jumped to the ground as the hangropes tumbled off the cottonwood limb. The two were tugging the deadly nooses off their heads when Reese joined them.

"Close call," panted Dusty. "And we still got that Roebuck jasper to think about."

Even as the fat detective spoke, a drumroll of hoofbeats caught their ears. WHEELING as one, the three CPA operatives caught sight of the Summit Rock derelict galloping away from the Knifegash bunkhouse, bent low in saddle as he spurred out of gunshot range on his way toward the Summit Rock road.

"We're lucky he didn't sneak up to back the sheriff's play," grunted Steve Reese. "I reckon that old drunk won't stop running until he's back in town."

Hank Ball tottered over to the Conestoga, climbed aboard. When he jumped down to the ground he held Sheriff McCleemont's gun-belts and holstered Colts. He buckled one set of gun harness on and tossed the other to Dusty.

"How come you showed up like this, Doc?" asked Dusty. "We'd given ourselves up for gone goslin's."

Reese grinned, and explained his lucky decision to leave Cliff and Marcia and return to Knight's ranch.

"We'll leave the sheriff where he is," Reese concluded, "and get some horses from Knight's cavvy corral. And I don't mind telling you I hope this is the last we see of this accursed ranch."

Five minutes later, the three CPA partners were heading across the mesa toward Rawhide Valley, following the trail left by Joe Knight and his night raiders.

"They plan to strike Copeland's outfit first," Reese said. "I think we'll get there in time to see the fireworks."

CHAPTER XV

Valley Showdown

A MILE down the Summit Rock Road, Tom Roebuck spurred off into the timber and cut over the ridge leading into the valley which the Knifegash Syndicate hoped to seize for its summer graze before this night was finished.

Blind, unreasoning

terror filled Roebuck. He had been an eye-witness to Steve Reese's sensational rescue of the two lynchrope victims at the J-K Connected tonight, and he knew that three expert gunmen of the Cattlemen's Protective Association were a terrible threat to the success of Knight's plans tonight.

The sheriff was dead, a victim of his own skulduggery. Roebuck knew that he himself was lucky to be alive.

Reaching the open slopes of the grassy valley, the derelict kept his mount at a reaching gallop, heading toward the river and Cliff Copeland's Twin C range. The moon was at the zenith when he hit the Rawhide and swam its icy surge to the east bank.

Reining up to let his horse rest, the saloon bum scanned the moonlit prairie he had just crossed. He spotted the fast-moving shapes of Reese and his two partners leaving the timber and heading toward the river, unaware that Roebuck was ahead of them.

"They aim to hit Knight from the rear when he goes to raid Copeland's place," decided Roebuck, dimly realizing that fate had made him the key figure in the gunsmoke drama to come.

The safest thing to do would be to head for Summit Rock. But Roebuck stood to gain a fat reward if he could locate Knight's raiders and tip them off of the danger approaching from the rear. A nice fat reward indeed.

Reining up-river, Roebuck followed the meandering course of the Rawhide, in the direction of the whitewashed buildings which marked the Twin C ranch, first target of the night riders' torches and guns. He was within a tenth of a mile of Copeland's ranch when a horseman suddenly spurred out of the river bank willows and blocked his trail with a Winchester.

Rickaree Ames, the Knifegash foreman! Roebuck had reached the rendezvous point where Knight's crew was assembled.

The saloon bum whispered his name as he headed his exhausted pony toward the dark bulwark of the willows. Neither he nor the syndicate foreman spoke; voices carried far at night.

Escorted into the willows by Ames, Roebuck caught sight of Knight and his riders waiting on the mudflats, out of sight of Copeland's place.

"It's Tom Roebuck, Boss" whispered the foreman, as they reined up in front of Joe Knight.

"What's the idea followin' us, Tom?" snarled Knight." "We heard you gallopin' up for the past mile. You want to wake up the Copelands, you danged fool?"

"There's the devil to pay, Mr. Knight," Roebuck said whiningly. "That Steve Reese hombre managed to get out of that root cellar somehow, and he shot the sheriff and rescued them two hombres we was fixin' to hang."

Knight stiffened in saddle, unable to believe his ears.

"The blazes you say! Are you drunk, Tom?"

Roebuck shook his head violently. "I tell you, them three CPA buskies are headin' for Copeland's right now. And they've had time to ford the Rawhide."

Joe Knight dragged a sleeve across his perspiring forehead.

"We've got no way of knowing how or when Reese got out of that cellar," he said, in a venomous undertone. "Boys, I reckon we'll ride back to meet Reese and his pards. Finish them off before we set fire to Copeland's barns."

Knight roweled his big gelding—the cream marked Apaloosa he had ridden on his bushwhack mission against Rocky Malone—and led his men up the willow-hung cutbank. They headed southward along the river.

THEY were in full view of Copeland's ranchhouse now, but Knight was gambling on the Twin C boss being asleep in his bed at this hour of the night. Moving Indian fashion up the east bank of the Rawhide, eyes probing the moonlit country ahead for a glimpse of Reese and his two aides, the Knife-

gash raiders had not thought to look across the narrow river to the west bank.

That oversight was a fatal one.

A roar of gunshots broke in violent echo across the river, and as the dismayed ranks of Knight's raiders heard lead streaking overhead, they reined up. They caught sight of Steve Reese, Hank Ball, and Dusty Trail directly across the stream, skylined against the crown of the west bank. The CPA men had not followed Roebuck across the river, but instead had followed the west bank to reach the Twin C. In so doing, they had saved their lives from ambush wipeout.

Yells of dismay came from the phalanx of Knifegash raiders as they returned the CPA trio's fire, only to see Reese and his lieutenants vanish from sight below the skyline river bank. And, as if in response to the volley of shots from that bank, the night suddenly exploded with sound as a score of riders came pounding out of Cliff Copeland's barns to attack Knight's rear.

A groan of despair escaped the range baron's lips. He saw the defenders of Copeland's ranch hammering across the bottomland slope toward them, fanning out to north and south to trap the Knifegash raiders between their gunfire and the swift-flowing river at their backs.

Too late, Knight realized that Reese's gunfire had not been an attack against impossible odds. The CPA men's shots had been a signal to bring out the small army of beleaguered cattlemen who, by some miracle, had assembled tonight at Cliff Copeland's ranch.

"The small-tally outfits got wind of our raid, men!" Knight shouted frantically. "We've either got to stand and make a fight of it or hightail across the river into the fire of Reese and his gunmen!"

There was no cover to hole up for a finish fight. The Knifegash killers were trapped hopelessly, and they knew it.

The Chihuahua Kid suddenly toppled from saddle, killed by a slug from one of the oncoming valley ranchers. Before his corpse had hit the ground, Sam Bozeman took a slug in the skull. Falling from saddle, he was dragged by a stirrup into the river by his bolting horse.

At such short range, with such a close-bunched targets, Copeland's men could not miss. Before Joe Knight's stunned eyes, he saw the town drunkard who had been his spy, Tom Roebuck, suddenly drop his reins and claw at a blood-gouting bullet-hole in his short ribs. Blotting out Roebuck's death screams came young Cliff Copeland's shout resounding above the crackle of fast-triggered guns:

"Pour it into 'em, boys! We got 'em shoved against the river!"

Pandemonium spread through the shattered ranks of Knight's men. These riders were paid gunmen; their only loyalty to the Knifegash in this summer graze-war lay in the gunsmoke wages Knight paid them.

They had left the J-K Connected tonight full of confidence thinking they were facing a disorganized, out-numbered series of small-tally ranchers. Now they found themselves faced with the combined fury of those ranchers.

"Stand and fight, men!" yelled Joe Knight, emptying his saddle carbine toward Copeland's oncoming riders. "The odds are even here!"

It was his own foreman, Rickaree Ames, who answered the range boss' appeal for help.

"Go to thunder, Joe. We got nothin' to gain, dyin' to help you hog this range. I'm surrenderin', pronto!"

Ames was throwing his guns to the ground and raising his hands when a wild bullet caught him in the throat. The sight of Ames's body slumping out of stirrups broke the back of any further resistance. At once a dozen gunmen jumped from saddle and raised their arms in total surrender.

WITH a frantic oath, Joe Knight spurred his Apaloosa toward the river, hitting the muddy waters with a

splash as he sent the gelding into midstream.

The Chinese ranch cook, Kid Fletch, and half a dozen other Knifegash gunmen followed their boss' example, plunging their mounts into the boiling surge of Rawhide's current. Behind them they faced overwhelming odds; ahead were only three men.

The shrill voice of Marcia Malone sounded above the melee then:

"Knight's escaping across the river, Cliff! We can't let Dad's bushwhacker get away!"

On the west bank, Stephen Reese and his partners were out of saddle now, standing in hip-high buffalo grass as they watched Knight and his eight escaping riders hit the mud bars and come up through the brisket-deep tules. As Knight led his men up the steep bank, a six-gun in either hand, Reese moved up into Knight's full view, a cocked .45 glinting in the moonlight.

"Trail's end, Knight!" called the CPA field chief. "You'll have your chance to face a judge and jury if you give up."

Knight shouted an oath as he reined his Apaloosa gelding straight toward the three CPA men at the top of the low rise. Flame spat from Knight's guns as he chopped down on Reese.

Then the CPA man's .45 bucked and jolted in his fist. Reese's single shot dumped the Knifegash land-grabber backward out of saddle, blood guttering from a bullet-hole punched between his eyes.

Fletch and the other Knifegash riders hurled up their arms as they faced the leveled guns of Hank Ball and Dusty Trail. Knifegash was finished forever. Nothing could be gained by trying to shoot their way past this trio of star-toters.

Ten minutes later, Steve Reese put his horse across the river to join Cliff Copeland and the other small-tally ranchers gathered on the east bank, their prisoners herded together under the menacing

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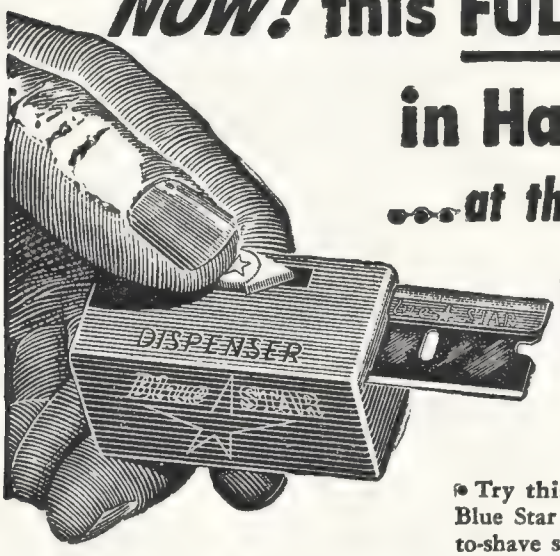

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guns of Buck Kasky and his Flying K cowboys.

Trailing Reese's pony at hackamore's length was Knight's cream-marked Apaloosa gelding, which had figured so prominently in the range baron's downfall. The rancher's corpse was jackknifed across the saddle, lashed to horn and stirrups.

In the rear, Hank Ball and Dusty Trail were escorting eight prisoners across the Rawhide.

"The Summit Rock coroner's goin' to be mighty busy diggin' graves tomorrow," declared Cliff Copeland, striding up through the moonlight to shake hands with Reese. Marcia was at his side, trying to smile through her tears.

Steve Reese climbed wearily from saddle. It was hard to realize that he and his men had smashed this range war in less than two days. But the strain had put its deep ruts in Reese's handsome face.

"There's Gill Espey to round up," he said, "then I guess we can consider Knifegash's power destroyed forever."

Copeland shrugged significantly. "Espey is lyin' dead on the porch of his Lazy E ranchhouse," he said. "When I was doin' my Paul Revere ride up the valley this afternoon, he figured it out and reached for his shootin' iron. I cut him down like I would a rattlesnake in dog days."

Marcia threw her arms around Reese's neck and kissed him soundly, to the delight of the ranchers. Then Hank Ball and Dusty Trail found themselves similarly rewarded.

"Cliff and I are going to be married in Summit Rock tomorrow," the girl said. "You'll stay for the wedding, won't you?"

Steve Reese grinned.

"We will consider it an honor and a privilege, ma'am. I reckon, in spite of all the grief we naturally feel because of a deep loss, it'll be a happy day for all of us, knowing this range feud is finished and Rawhide Valley is safe from Joe Knight's ambitions. He worked on the theory that guns can buy summer graze—forgetting that he and his wild bunch weren't bullet-proof either."

Far across the star-dusted Colorado night, from the direction of Ten-mile Gulch trestle, came the deep, melodious whistle of a narrow-gauge locomotive on the Colorado & Rio Grande's main line.

"One thing's sure," chuckled Dusty Trail, lighting up one of his ubiquitous stogies, "we'll never again stand on no coach platform admirin' the purty scenery and the purty girls the train passes."

Hank Ball, seeing Cliff Copeland and Marcia in a tight embrace, muttered softly, "I hate to think where those two kids would be right now if we hadn't seen Rocky's bushwhackin' yesterday, *amigo*."

Steve Reese, Hank Ball and Dusty Trail at Their Best in

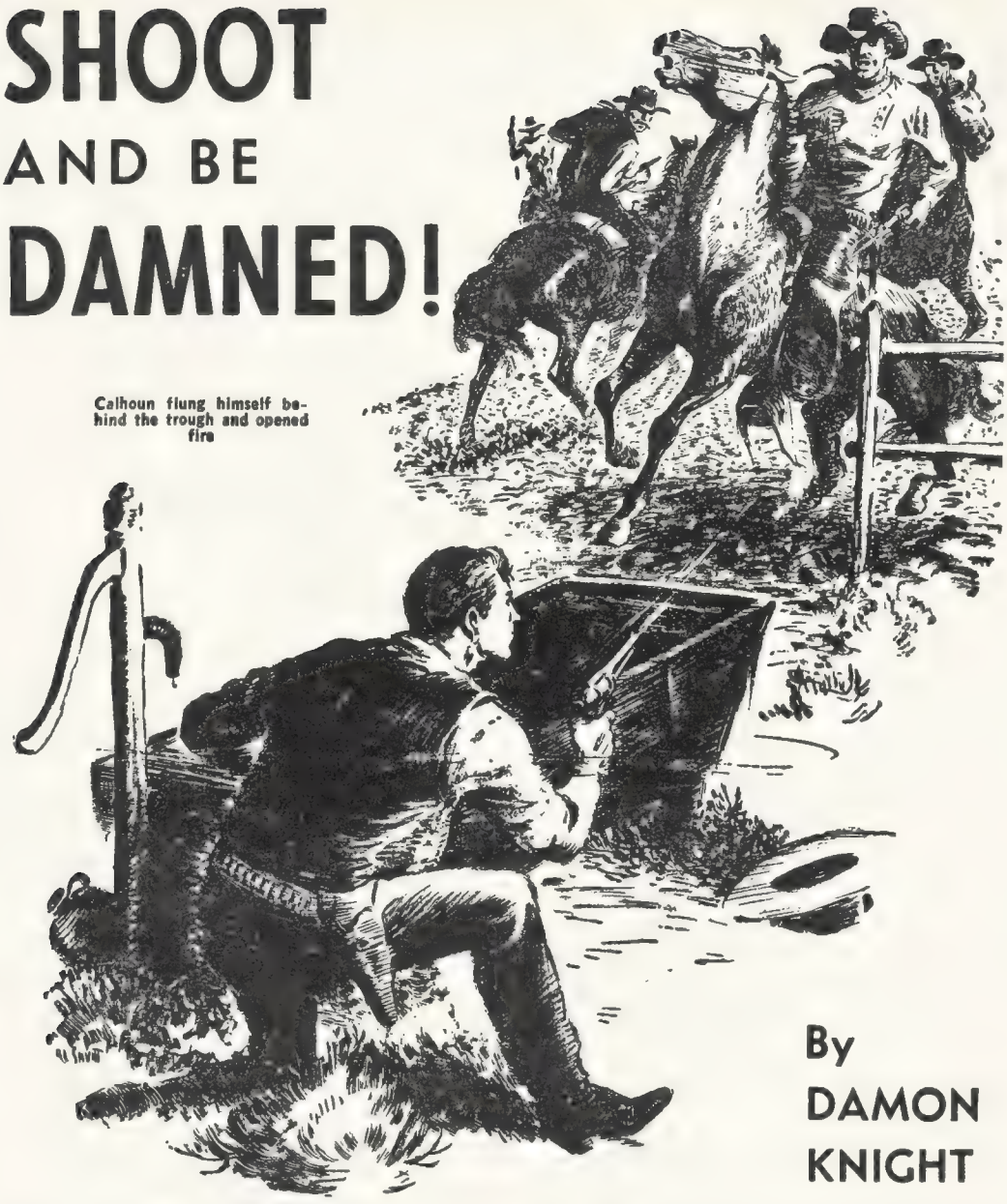
BEEF ACROSS THE BORDER

A Fast-Moving Complete Novel

By WALKER A. TOMPKINS

In Our Next Issue

SHOOT AND BE DAMNED!



Calhoun flung himself behind the trough and opened fire

By DAMON KNIGHT

LEAN Sam Calhoun came out of it slowly, felt the rough board floor of the bank under his cheek, smelled the acrid odor of gunsmoke hanging in the air. He opened his eyes and the first thing he saw was the huge iron safe in the far corner of the room, its heavy door hanging drunkenly from the hinges. He got to hands and knees, then pushed himself erect, ignoring the waves of dizziness that came over him.

Someone shrilled, "Oh Lord! Oh Gawd have mercy!"

Calhoun looked to his right. It was

If Calhoun fought back—he'd risk his girl's life!

gray-haired little Miz Durkee, the storekeeper's plump wife. She was tied with a length of lariat to a straight chair at the front of the bank, beyond the low railing. Sam moved toward her.

Her eyes bugged at him, seemed to take a long time in focussing. *She's scared out of her wits,* Calhoun thought. He bent over her painfully and tugged at the knots. She began to scream.

"It's all right," he said in what he hoped was a soothing voice. "They're gone, Miz Durkee."

She screamed again and pulled away from him with all her strength, making it impossible for him to loosen the rope. He gave it up and sat down on the railing.

Blood had dripped from his temple onto one of the stiff cardboard cylinders that protected his cuffs. He took it off slowly and dropped it over the railing into the waste basket.

From where he sat he could see two walls of the one-room bank: inside the railing the two desks, the overturned chair, scattered papers; on the other side the visitors' bench, the steel engraving of President Grant tacked to the wall, and the open doorway, giving a partial view of Gold City's one street.

THE "City" was only a boast, so far. The three doorways Sam could see made up a fifth of the business establishments in town. One of the doors opened, then another, and men came out into the pale morning light. They cast apprehensive glances up the street and then hurried over into the bank. Others appeared in a moment and crowded in after them.

Durkee, the general storekeeper, was in the lead; a short man, as were most of the others. His little monkey face screwed up into a comical grimace and he headed straight for his wife, hands fluttering at the ropes. They made hysterical sounds at each other.

Two of the men were miners, probably just arrived in town for supplies. If they had been here earlier, they would have tried to stop the bandits. The townsmen were no help; they were a bunch of rabbits.

Broad, black-bearded Forty Rod Bohan came over and spoke to Sam Calhoun and looked at his head. The other, lanky Ed Flagg, stood at the railing and stared at the wrecked safe.

"They sure cleaned it out," he said glumly. "Don't look like we can git any money laid by nohow."

"Just a scratch," said Forty Rod. "Bet you seen stars, though, Sam."

"Knocked me out," said Calhoun. "I reckon they left me for dead." He saw the six-gun lying on the floor inside the railing, and started to go after it. Forty Rod held him back and went for it himself. He brushed it off and handed it to Sam.

"Thanks," Calhoun said, and shoved it into his holster. "One shot fired," he said.

Forty Rod looked at him intently. "Now, Sam, you done the best you ever could."

"Well," said Ed Flagg, "it wasn't enough. No offense, Sam, but it don't look to me like havin' a bank does much good. Holly and his men just come an' get it all in one lump, 'stead of a little at a time."

There would be more of that, Calhoun knew; but he said nothing.

"Oh, those horrible men!" Miz Durkee was shrilling. Durkee made comforting clucking noises at her, but she couldn't stop. "They was just bristling with guns, and they told Sam Calhoun to drop his gun and open the safe for them, but he wouldn't, he shot at them and they shot back. And I was right there in the middle! Oh, Charlie, and then they tied me up and started busting open the safe—" She began sobbing, clinging to her husband.

Durkee turned his monkey face scowling toward Sam. "Seems to me, Calhoun," he said, "you didn't have to start a shooting spree when my wife was in the bank."

Calhoun started to speak, looked up and saw a slim figure coming through the doorway. The words dried up in his throat. That always happened when he saw Mary Enright, the Reverend John Henry Enright's red-haired daughter. And, he told himself soberly, it wasn't only because she reminded him of Prudence. She was too much of a person in her own right; he wouldn't dare to love her for a paltry reason.

Her wide eyes searched him, found no wound but the scratch along his left temple. "Hello, Sam," she said, and then waited. Calhoun knew she was waiting to hear what he would say to Durkee.

But there weren't words enough. To answer the little man, he'd have to recite the whole history of Colorado, and then go into detail about the way things had been in Gold City before the bank was built. He'd have to tell first how occasional wandering bands had raided the district and then how Big Foot Holly had driven them out and taken this whole section for his own stamping grounds, returning with maddening regularity to take the lion's share of the miner's hoards for himself. And maybe when he'd finished, it still wouldn't be enough.

How could you weigh seven thousand dollars' worth of nuggets and dust against the life and limb of Miz Durkee? And if you could, where would you find a scale to measure the futures and the self-respect of Gold City's hundred-odd miners?

Forty Rod answered for him. "Durkee," he said, "if the prices you charge ain't enough to pay you for living in a place where folks get shot at, how come you don't move somewheres else?"

Durkee scowled and took his wife out of the bank. That seemed to settle that, but Calhoun knew it was only temporary.

Mary took his arm and led him out into the rutted street toward Doc Kennedy's shingle. Calhoun paused outside and looked up at the sign over the door they had just left: GOLD CITY BANK. S. Calhoun, Pres. It was painted in good solid black letters, a professional job by a traveling sign painter who had passed through ten months ago. It didn't seem to have weathered any at all, and yet Sam had the feeling that it wouldn't be there much longer.

IN SILENCE they walked to the end of the short street. Doc Kennedy's place was the last one on the north side; beyond that, the road led straight out across the valley toward the frozen upsurge of the Rockies. Nothing was visible on it. Holly had simply ridden in, taken what he wanted, and ridden out again. The miners lived in the hills; there was no one here to stop him.

Doc Kennedy was lying asleep in the back room, his sparse gray hair tousled on the pillow. Calhoun shook him awake and then waited patiently while the doctor splashed water on his gray face, hunted up carbolic acid and linen bandages. The sunlight was stronger now, casting a narrow bar across the floor and over Sam's knees as the doctor worked on him.

"Somebody rob the bank, Sam?" Kennedy wanted to know. Calhoun told him yes.

"Mrs. Durkee was in the bank when it happened," Mary put in. "Sam had to choose whether he'd try to save the bank's money or his customer. He picked the money."

Calhoun's jaw set. "You finished, Doc?" he asked tonelessly.

"Yep," said the old man, stepping away. "That'll be five dollars."

Calhoun paid him and led Mary out into the street again.

"Well, Sam?" she said.

They stopped and Calhoun turned to face her. "It's more than a choice between money and a life," he said, choosing his words carefully. "Look at it this way. If you could know for sure that somebody would die if you did a certain thing, why, you'd only have one choice. But you can't, not ever. You always have to decide for yourself—God won't do it for you. Between fighting and quitting, I'll take fighting."

"But they got the money anyhow," Mary pointed out. "And poor Mrs. Durkee might have been killed."

"That's woman talk," said Calhoun bitterly. "She wasn't killed. As for the money, I tried to stop them. Why would I build a bank and sweat over books trying to learn to run it right, if I won't fight to keep it going?"

There was a pause. "Sam," the girl said, "supposing I'd been in there, instead of Mrs. Durkee—what would you have done then?"

There it came, Calhoun thought and again there were no words that would suit. His jaw set; she saw that he was not going to answer.

"Never mind," she said. "I'm sorry I

asked you."

Silence hung between them like something palpable. Mary asked him finally whether he thought he could keep the bank going. He told her he hoped so. She said she would see him at church Sunday, and they parted. *I'm right,* Calhoun thought, *and that's all that matters.* But it wasn't.

He went back to his tiny room over Peabody's hardware shop. He thought about Prudence, and his dead son. The old wound had not healed; it had only scabbed over, and new violence had opened it. He remembered how he had felt five years ago—twenty-five then, married less than a year, with a booming new business. His was the first sawmill in the newly opened Cascades section in Oregon. It filled a need, and he had more work than he could handle. Prudence was beautiful and loved him, and they had a month-old son, Peter.

He remembered the first time he had seen Lawson—broad, cruel face shining with sweat in the sunlight outside Sam's cabin. Lawson owned a mill down the river, and Calhoun was hurting his business. He offered to buy him out, and when Sam refused, Lawson took a huge jackknife from his pocket, opened the broad blade and whetted it slowly against his thumb.

"You'll wish you had," Lawson said, and went away.

Then there was the terrible morning when half a dozen armed men raided the mill, catching Sam outside at the pump. He was wearing his gun at least; he flung himself down behind the horse trough and fired at them. They scattered for cover, and then time stood still as Calhoun fired at a shape behind a tree, was fired at in return.

Then Lawson's bellow rang out: "Calhoun! Look over yonder!"

A man was standing at the corner of the cabin where Prudence and the baby were almost out of pistol range. In his hand was a blazing torch.

"Throw your gun down and come out!" Lawson shouted.

Calhoun could have risked everything, fired at the man with the torch. But if he missed, the cabin would blaze in the next instant. He made his choice; he gave up, tossed his gun into the weeds and stepped out into the open.

A shot greeted him and he felt the lead slam into his chest, whirling him to the ground. Dimly he saw the man with the torch, heard him laugh as he swung it over his head and tossed it onto the cabin roof.

The mill came next, but Sam did not even watch it while it burned. Lying there, unable to move, he kept his eyes fixed on the cabin door while the flames swept around it. Prudence and the baby never came out.

HE LAY there long after Lawson and his men had ridden away; long after the cabin was only a heap of charred and glowing wood. He lay between life and death for two days, until a logging crew found him.

There was no comfort, then or later, in his killing of Lawson. He did it because the single spark of hatred left in him required it—waited until he was well enough to fight, tracked his man down, shot him. There was no triumph in it, and after that he had nothing at all to live for.

He moved from place to place, working without interest at whatever came to hand. In Gold City he staked out a barren claim and worked it for a while, expecting nothing and finding nothing. He was about to move on again when the camp was raided, three miners robbed and beaten. Talking about it afterwards, the thought came to him—if there was a bank here, this place could grow.

He mentioned it timidly at first, then with growing enthusiasm. The miners agreed; they chipped in to help him build, to buy a safe and get it sent in by freight wagon.

Calhoun worked hard, studied his books at night, learning about rates of interest and safe investments, about amortization and collateral. He couldn't get insurance on his deposits, and that was bad, but he went ahead. The town prospered; some of the miners sent for their wives. The Reverend Enright came to town, built his church, and Sam met Mary.

Now his first test had come. The result was almost complete ruin, but he knew he'd chosen rightly this time. And he had the will to fight. The only question

was, would he get another chance?

In the afternoon he rode up into the hills to talk with the miners. The news had gone before him. Some of the miners were still friendly, willing to trust him, but all were discouraged.

"I'll do what I can," Forty Rod told him, standing in front of the dark entrance to his diggings, "but some of the boys'll be hard to handle. They figure they can make it harder for Holly to find their pokes, at least, if they keep 'em in their own caches. We was all hit hard by this, you know, Sam."

"I'll make it all up," Calhoun told him grimly. "Every penny. Holly got my savings, too, of course, but I'll pay it back out of my salary. And there's something else. If the bank closes for good, Big Foot Holly will get his cut just the same, but he'll have to beat and kill a few of you men to do it. When the gold's in the bank, I'm the one that gets shot at. And I'll make sure that I don't get caught flat-footed again."

Forty Rod nodded. "I'm on your side, Sam," he said. "You go argue with Ed Flagg and them boys. They're the ones you got to convince."

It was a task for Hercules, Calhoun discovered. Day after day he rode up to the mines, argued and persuaded. Forty out of the hundred were willing to help him start again; then forty-three, then fifty. Finally, at the end of the week, he had enough of a majority to swing the rest. A collection was taken up and Calhoun ordered a new safe from Philadelphia. Four seven-foot sections of iron grille, with a strong lock, were to come with it. Calhoun waited.

This time, he knew, he had to make it work. There wouldn't be another opportunity. If he failed, Gold City would go back to the anarchy of buried pokes, raids at night, men tortured and killed to make them give up their hoards. Rich as it was, the field would never grow into a city as long as that went on. Eventually, unless Holly learned not to be too greedy, or was driven out of the territory, it wouldn't pay for anyone to work the gold field. And Calhoun himself would be a wanderer again, wifeless, spiritless, homeless.

He saw Mary at church, but she would not meet him after the services. On the following Sunday, she consented to ride with him up into the foothills. They talked, and she was friendly enough, but there was no purpose in their talk. Calhoun was unproved, a banker without a bank; there was little he could say to her until he had something concrete to offer.

Finally the new safe came and the seven-foot grilles with their massive lock. Calhoun set them up around the safe, hid the key in a wall chink and would not open the lock in anyone else's presence.

The miners came, saw, and brought their gold in. Deposits mounted in the books. Calhoun moved a cot into the building, ate frugally, and began the slow process of paying back to his depositors what they had lost in the robbery. His notes again became accepted currency in the town and reports came that Big Foot Holly was raiding now in the northern part of the state, hundreds of miles away. But Calhoun lived in the daily expectation of bad news, and one day Forty Rod brought it.

"I was over to Cripple Creek," he said. "Got a nephew over there, you know. Sam, Holly's back—pulled a raid there yesterday. That means he'll be back here before long. Think maybe we better get some of the boys to stay in town and keep an eye on the bank for a week or so?"

"You know that won't work," Calhoun told him. "It was tried before we built the bank, when you lumped your nuggets together and set a guard over them, and Holly always waited until the guard pulled out. He can send his riders up on the ridges and watch every move you make."

Forty Rod nodded. "I know," he said. "But seems to me we got to do something. You stand a fair chance of getting killed, Sam."

"I'll take my chances," Calhoun told him. "If Gold City was bigger, it would be different—we could afford a regular marshal and a couple of full-time deputies. But the way things stand, I'm it."

"You sure are," the black-bearded miner said. "Tell you what, Sam. I'll come into town every night for a while, anyways, and keep guard till daylight. I can sleep late a few mornings; won't

hurt me none."

Calhoun looked at him soberly, then grinned. "Thanks, Forty Rod," he said. "Glad to have you."

FORTY ROD smiled sheepishly and left, promising to be back before midnight. Calhoun picked up his pen and went back to his endless records.

He looked up, instinctively pulling his Colt loose in its holster, when a shadow darked the doorway. Mary stood there, sunlight making a fiery halo around her head. Her long gingham skirts swished as she came toward him.

"Here's some dust my father wants to deposit," she said.

Calhoun holstered the gun again. He examined the dust, weighed it, gravely entered it in his books and gave her a note for the amount. He dropped the heavy leather pokes into a drawer of his desk.

"Aren't you going to put them in the safe?" she asked.

"After you leave, I will," he agreed.

She frowned, and her full lips thinned. "Meaning that you don't trust me?" she asked deliberately.

Calhoun felt himself twisting inside, as if she had dipped one of her long, white fingers delicately into his insides and stirred them around. But he kept his tone expressionless.

"I trust you, Mary, but the bank doesn't trust anybody."

Color began to creep up the smooth curve of her cheeks.

"And the bank is more important than anything, isn't it, Sam?"

"No," he said evenly. "I want a lot of things worse than the bank, but the bank is the way I'm trying to get them. It's worth more to me than any amount of foolishness, though, if that's what you mean."

He shouldn't have said that, he realized instantly; the hurt look on her face showed that she'd put the worst possible interpretation on it.

"Goodbye," she said abruptly, and turned away.

Calhoun jumped up, put his hand on the railing and vaulted over. He grasped her arm.

"Wait a minute," he said. "Can't you see, Mary—all I meant was that I can't afford to take risks if I can help it. If I can't—all right, I'll take a chance, no matter how slim." He paused. "I found out a long time ago that that's the only sensible way to get what you want. Sometime I'll tell you about it; maybe you'll understand me better then."

She looked at him levelly. "I don't know, Sam," she said. "I want to understand you—" Her lips softened, and for an instant he felt himself leaning imperceptibly toward her. "But I don't know if I ever will," she finished, and turned decisively to the door.

Calhoun watched her go, feeling somehow as if the conversation had writhed out of his grasp at the last moment. It was a familiar feeling. He grinned wryly and went back to his desk. He opened the drawer, took out the pokes, and started with them toward the crack in the wall where the grille key was hidden.

He heard a queer muffled sound outside, and his first thought was that Mary had tripped in one of the deep ruts of the street. He turned quickly and started for the door. On the way he dropped the pokes back in the drawer and, out of habit, drew his gun.

He was halfway there when Mary came back through the door. She came unwillingly, white-faced, arms held behind her by a broad, big-hatted figure. Behind came another and still another, until there were four big, dust-streaked men in the room. They spread out quickly to the right of the door, slightly behind the leader who held Mary pinned against his own body.

Calhoun stood frozen, gun half-raised in his hand, staring at them. He thought irrelevantly, *they must have left their horses outside of town so as not to warn me.* Over Mary's head, a heavy-jowled, squint-eyed face stared back at him. That was Big Foot himself.

One of the men said, "So you're still kickin', banker? That's a shame."

"Shut up," said Big Foot. He showed Calhoun his Colt and carefully put the muzzle of it against Mary's head. "Now," he said to Sam, "unlock that fence of yours and open the safe."

The tension of Calhoun's muscles was agonizing. He listened abstractedly to the sound of horses being led up outside,

There's no use asking, "What if I don't?" His right hand was still clenched around the butt of his gun. Sweat was gathering in his palm, making it slippery.

The seconds were racing past. He knew he would have to move soon, before Holly grew tired of waiting. He looked at each of the men in turn without moving his head, trying to memorize the way they stood, how attentive they were, what angles of fire they commanded.

The result was not heartening. All three of the men to Holly's right had a clear view of Calhoun, all were tense and ready. And Holly, the one he had to get if he fired at all, was almost completely shielded behind Mary; only his heavy head and shoulders were clear.

Calhoun looked at Holly again, caught a glimpse of Mary's white, scared face, and resolutely looked away *I mustn't think about her any more than I can help,* he told himself. *The only thing is whether I can do it or not.*

HE SAW that Holly's gun-barrel slanted upward and was aimed in the general direction of the other three. That was some help, but not much. That gun would certainly go off if Holly were shot; the crucial, the impossibly urgent question was, would it kick up far enough to miss Mary's head?

He deliberately let his gun-barrel drop a trifle, and saw Holly's eyes narrow in satisfaction. Then he tightened it again, brought the gun up in a blur of motion. There was an instant of suspended time when he stared along the barrel at the visible fraction of Holly's head; then he fired. The smoke and flash blotted out that section; he could not see what had happened, but he knew that Holly's gun had roared a split-second after his.

He felt a crushing blow in his side and fell to one knee, swiveling, firing as he landed. He saw the end man go down, gun dropping from his fingers, saw the other two oddly crouched. A gun blazed twice and he felt a second shock that numbed his extended left leg. *Awful poor shooting,* he thought wildly, and fired again. The range was almost too close to miss; he saw another man fall, leaving one. He aimed with desperate haste, missed and fired again. Unbelievably, the last man was down.

The gun-roar echoed in his ears. He looked dazedly around. What he'd done was impossible; four men downed with five shots. He thought, *Mary!* and some of the haze cleared. He looked, saw her body lying beside Holly's. He could not tell whether she was alive or dead; and in that terrible instant another shadow fell across the doorway. Calhoun looked up, saw a pop-eyed face under a broad hat, saw a hand streaking for holster—the man with the horses.

Almost automatically, his gun-hand came up and he fired. He waited only long enough to see the man slump across the sill; then his eyes darted back to Mary's unmoving form He could see no wound, but that wasn't enough. He tried to get up, failed, and began hitching himself across the floor toward her.

He maneuvered himself through the gate in the railing, got to her side. She was breathing, and there was no wound that he could see. He lifted his gaze, and saw the long, bright bullet-scar in the ceiling, feathered with razor-sharp splinters; hurtling daggers of wood, that had exploded among Holly's men when he fired.

It was thirty minutes before the townsmen dared to come out of their rabbit-holes and investigate. By that time Mary had recovered from her faint; she was sitting up, cradling Sam's head in her arms when the first arrived.

Later, when old Doc Kennedy had left them discreetly alone, she said to him, "Sam, I—I vow I don't know what to think. You saved me, and the bank, and the whole town, but you risked my life to do it. I wish I could know whether it was because—"

He finished solemnly, "Because I love you or because I don't?" He went on, "I think you know, Mary. I was lucky, sure. I counted on Holly's shot making some kind of a fuss, but the splinters he knocked out of the ceiling hitting the other men, spoiling their aim—that was pure luck. But don't you see, I banked on that, too. The man who goes after what he wants makes his own luck."

And a few moments later he had the last proof he needed that he was right.

LEAD and FLAME

Following the stolen herd, Range Boss Tom Morgan and his angered crew chase the rustler outfit deep into the heart of the torrid desert—where only the fittest can survive!

NIGHT brooded over the rangeland like a nesting bird. The stars were glowing grapes of gold in a sky of black-purple velvet. A faint wind stirred the grassheads and sent a ripple of dusty silver weaving across the prairie.

Out of the shadowy east, borne on the wings of the voiceless wind, came a blurred whisper of sound as of fumbling fingers clumsily drawing back the mantle of silence that blanketed the grasslands. It grew to a soft tapping, like to fairy feet pattering across the cups of the Texas bluebells, loudened swiftly to a churning beat that swelled to the muffled thudding of many hoofs on the spongy ground.

Morgan cast a glance at the ridge of hills in front of them.

"Three or four canyons lead up to that notch," observed the tall young range boss. "They can take any one of them and Red Hanley knows every inch of this section. He's smart and salty and he'll have something figured, see if he doesn't."

"Maybe," admitted Lawlor, "but he didn't figure on Bud Raines bein' only creased instead of drilled dead center. If Bud hadn't come to and got word to us, Hanley would have had them cows across the hills before we knew he'd lifted the herd. That's where he slipped."

"Yes, but I'm willing to bet a hatful of pesos he took into account all such possible slips," Morgan said. "That cow thief is smart as a treeful of hooting owls."

"Anyhow, it's gettin' plumb light and them cows are leavin' a plain trail," Lawlor growled. "He won't be able to slip into the hills and us not know which way he took."

On swept the Bradded L riders, with the glowing east behind them and the gloom of the hills in front. Light began to flow across the prairie in a flood. The crests of the hills were tipped with fire. The stark cliffs were jagged masses of frozen flame. The canyons were still caves of shadow with the sunlight glinting on the twigs of the growth that clothed their slopes.

Straight into one of the murky canyons led the trail of the widelooped herd. The floor of the gorge was choked with growth. Down one side flowed a swift stream with banks rising a few feet above the water level. Miles to the west, the punchers could see where the floor sloped up to the notch slashing the hill crests. That notch was the only practicable route through the hills. It was wide and several canyons opened into it. A dark and moving mass loomed in the wan shimmer from the spangled

By A. LESLIE

Morgan fired at the hidden dryguicher

sky. Starlight glinted on tossing horns, reflected from rolling eyes. The individual shapes of lumbering cattle took form, rushing out of the night. Behind and on either side of the herd rode horsemen urging the blowing cows to greater speed.

The horsemen numbered a full dozen, hard-eyed watchful men who sat their mounts with the careless grace of a lifetime in the saddle. They cast swift glances over their shoulders from time to time, then gazed toward the nearing gloom of the hills and redoubled their efforts to get more speed from the blowing cows.

Into the shadows of the west the herd vanished. Swiftly the silence closed down once more. An hour passed. And again the veil of the silence was rent by staccato tapping.

This time the pound of swift hoofs was much faster. Through the growing light of dawn bulged a second band of hard riding horsemen, nine in number. But no protesting cattle accompanied them. Grim-faced, purposeful they rode, eyes straining to the front.

"We're gainin' on 'em," old John Lawlor, owner of the Bradded L spread declared.

"Yes," conceded Tom Morgan, his range boss, "but they got a head start. They'll make the hills before we catch 'em up."

"But they can't make it to the notch before we're right on their tails," said Lawlor. "They can't get through the hills any other way."

The horses sped across the bright reaches of the prairie and entered the gloom of the gorge, crashing their way through the growth. The herd had left a broad trail of smashed brush and broken branches. A blind man with a bad cold could have followed it without error.

IN FACT, everything looked too easy to Tom Morgan. The notorious Red Hanley, a brutal killer and one of the smartest of owlhoot leaders along the Texas Border, was not the sort to overlook anything. The canyon mouth into which the herd had been driven was the obvious route for Hanley to take, and Hanley was not noted for doing the obvious. To the south was stony ground on which a trail could be hidden. Then there were several canyons into which Hanley could have turned. By which method he would have slowed possible pursuit.

On sped the horses through the tinder dry growth that abruptly began to thin. Directly ahead was a stretch of stony open ground extending from wall to wall of the canyon. It was several hundred yards in width and sloped steeply upward to a ridge crest densely clothed with brush, the first of a series of benches that climbed to the distant and lofty notch.

The hard riding troop bulged from the growth. And echoing the clatter of irons on the stony ground clanged the hard, metallic report of a rifle.

The cowboy riding stirrup to stirrup with Tom Morgan gave a queer choking grunt, reeled sideways in his saddle and thudded to the ground to lie on his back, arms wide flung, a blue hole between his staring eyes.

A second rider yelled with pain as a slug ripped the upper part of his leg. A horse squealed under the sting of a furrow crimsoning its haunch.

"Back!" roared Morgan. "We're drygulched! Back!"

The cowboys jerked their mounts to a slithering halt, whirled them and streaked back into the brush, lead storming about their ears. Before they gained cover, a third man got a slug through his thigh. More bullets clipped twigs and leaves over their heads. Morgan swiftly dismounted. Holding on to one of the reins of his horse, he fired at the hidden drygulcher.

"Unfork!" ordered Morgan. "Hug the ground. Hardy, you take the broncs back a little farther before one of 'em gets plugged."

"Get your rifles out of the boots,

first," Lawlor added. "We'll see if we can smoke up those gents a bit."

A hail of lead tore through the brush cresting the slope. There was no answer to the fire, but when Lawlor thrust forth a hat on the end of a rifle barrel, a whistling slug missed it by inches.

Lawlor swore viciously as he jerked back the hat.

"Holed up for fair," he growled. "We can't even drag in poor old Bill Wilson. Not that it matters much, I reckon. He's beyond help. Drilled dead center."

Tom Morgan nodded, his lean face was set in lines bleak as chiseled granite. His cold gray eyes swept the ridge crest, raised to the distant notch.

"There go the cows," he remarked quietly.

Lawlor, staring toward the notch, saw a multitude of bouncing dots melting into the shadows. He swore again.

"Uh-huh, they're runnin' 'em through," he said. "Left some of their men down here to hold us back. You were right, Tom. That sidewinder has plenty of savvy."

Morgan was still eying the ridge.

"Boss," he said slowly, "I've a notion there's just one man holed up on top that sag. I'm going to make a try for him."

"You're loco!" snorted the Bradded L owner. "He'd plug you before you got half way across the clearin'."

MORGAN gestured to the right. "I believe I can make it up to the brush by way of the creek bed," he said. "It's a cool morning and the mist is still hanging over the water, and the bank rises a couple of feet above the water level."

"You'll be takin' a terrible chance," said Lawlor. "He's liable to spot you, and besides the water runs flush with the bank most of the time, and it comes down that sag mighty swift. It's a fool notion, Tom. The herd's gone, so why take chances?"

Morgan nodded toward the body sprawled just beyond the edge of the sheltering growth.

"Bill Wilson was my bunkie," he said grimly. "I brought Bill to the Bradded L. Give me half an hour and then lift your sights a mite so you won't plug me by mistake. If I hogtie him, I'll give a whoop and you can come a-running with the horses. Here, take my Winchester. I won't be able to pack it along."

"You're loco," sputtered Lawlor, "but I reckon there's no stoppin' you. Good luck!"

Morgan slipped quietly through the brush and made it to the creek bed without difficulty. But then his troubles began. He was forced to crawl through the shallow water close to the bank and a glint of sunbeams on the ripples he disturbed might easily catch the eye of the alert watcher on the ridge.

At last he reached a point where the growth stood stiff and tall on the stream bank. He eased out of the water and crept stealthily up the slope and peered over the ridge crest.

Behind the crest of the ridge, less than a dozen feet from Morgan, a stocky, bearded man lay stretched out full length upon his stomach, with the muzzle of his rifle thrust through a narrow crack between two boulders. He was the outlaw who, less than an hour before, had drygulched Bill Wilson, one of Morgan's best friends.

Morgan's face grew stern. He cocked his sixshooter and leveled it at the man lying on the slope.

"Throw up your hands!" he ordered.

The outlaw gave a start of surprise, let go of the rifle, and rolled over until he was facing Morgan. But he did not obey the command. Instead, with the speed of a striking rattler, he snatched out his own Colt and fired instantly. If Morgan had not flinched aside, the slug would have taken off the top of his head.

ALMOST as quickly Morgan's gun bellowed. The rustler dropped flat, with a bullet hole between the eyes. Morgan waited a moment, until the

smoke had cleared away. Then he stood up and made his way along the slope until he reached the outlaw's side. The outlaw did not stir. Morgan thrust his own Colt back in the holster and raised his voice in a stentorian yell.

"Come a-runnin'!" he whooped to the holed-up Bradded L bunch.

Answering shouts and a crashing in the brush sounded beyond the clearing. Morgan turned his attention to the dead man.

He was an ornery looking specimen, thick-set and powerful of build. His hair, showing beneath his jammed-down hat was gray. Or so Morgan thought at first glance. A closer examination showed it to be thickly powdered with a very fine, whitish dust. Similar dust prinkled his rough rangeland garb.

"Looks like he's been wallowing in an alkali bed," Morgan muttered. "How come, I wonder?" The arrival of the Bradded L hands drove the matter from his mind.

"So you got the horned toad!" whooped old John. "A fine chore, Tom, a mighty fine chore!" Crane, you'd better head back for the spread," he told the cowboy with the wounded thigh. "You're in no shape for hard ridin' with that hole through your leg. We'll rope Wilson's body to his saddle and you can take it along with you."

The unpleasant chore was quickly taken care of. Then the remaining eight riders mounted their horses again and sent them scrambling up the slope. They streamed through the notch and viewed the long slopes to the west. The stolen herd was nowhere in sight. The slopes ended in a wild jumble of canyons and gorges. Morgan shook his head, but Lawlor shouted for more speed.

At the base of the slopes was stony ground over which not even Tom Morgan's keen eyes could detect any signs of the herd's passing. They explored canyons and thickets, followed what appeared to be trails and found, nothing. Overhead the sky was one vast leaden arch that promised early nightfall.

"The big question is where in blazes does Red Hanley run the critters," Lawlor growled a little later as they pulled up at the base of a tall ridge to breathe their horses and roll cigarettes. "Sheriffs and Rangers have been on the lookout all along the Border and every place else ever since he started operatin' in this section. He's run off a dozen herds and not a single cow of 'em has shown up anywhere."

Tom Morgan was gazing southward where the long swale curved along the base of the ridge, his gray eyes reflective. He pushed back his broad-brimmed sombrero.

"John," he said slowly, "I got a hunch he runs them into the desert."

LAWLOR regarded his range boss as if firmly convinced he held converse with a lunatic.

"Run cows into the Tonto Desert?" he snorted. "You sure must be goin' loco all of a sudden!"

Morgan answered quietly, "All the same I got a notion. Did you notice anything peculiar about that drygulcher back in the canyon?"

Lawler shook his head. "Can't say as I did," he admitted.

"His clothes and his hair," Morgan replied. "They were covered with alkali dust. The only place you find alkali dust in this section is out on the Tonto Desert. I'm willing to bet a hatful of pesos that feller was on the Tonto yesterday, which means Hanley and his bunch were on the Tonto and came out of the Tonto to make their raid. I figure they have to hit the Tonto to get back with the cows, a hole-up from which he can make a run to Mexico, the only place he can dispose of the beefs."

"Tom, you know darn well it ain't possible," Lawlor answered. "Not at this time of the year, anyhow. It's better than sixty miles across the desert to the Border. Sixty miles of dust and rocks and blindin' heat. No herd could make that run without water and rest on the way."

"There's been considerable rain of late," Morgan mused, inconsequentially.

"And looks like there'll be more which will help to make us comfortable," Lawlor grunted, glancing at the frowning sky.

"Maybe there's a hidden spring out there somewhere," Morgan conjectured.

"Well," Lawlor returned caustically, "if there is, it's darn funny desert rats wanderin' over that up-ended section of hell for years have never found it. Lost River, midway across, is bone dry all year except for a couple of weeks in the spring. No, Hanley has to run 'em through the hills and circle the desert on the west to make Mexico."

"But he doesn't," Morgan pointed out. "John, there's always a way to do a thing, and the owlhoot breed is mighty good at nosing out ways nobody else ever thought of."

They made camp beside a little trickle of water seeping from under a cliff. Lawlor's pessimism relative to bad weather was not justified. No rain fell during the night and when morning came the sky was clear. They threw together a hurried breakfast and in the strengthening light rode down the draw.

BEFORE they had covered five miles they discovered corroboration of Morgan's theory. On a patch of softer ground were signs of the recent passage of cattle, headed south.

"It's them, all right!" Lawlor exulted. "Tom, I'm beginning to think maybe you ain't loco. All we got to do now is keep them tracks in sight."

But keeping the tracks in sight proved to be far from an easy chore. Soon the draw split into a number of branches that wound this way and that, and there was no way of telling which one led to the desert. Time and again they lost the trail, and each time only after slow and tedious searching did they find it again. It was late afternoon when the hills at last fell away on either side and they found themselves on the gray desolation of the desert.

It had been fairly cool in the draws and canyons, but the moment they cleared the shadow of the hills, the heat struck them like the breath of a blast furnace. As far as the eye could reach there was nothing but arid sands and leprous alkali dust, the drab monotony relieved only by juts of chimney rocks and huge isolated boulders with here and there a dead looking cactus brandishing spined and twisted arms like a devil in torment.

But paralleling the base of the hills and heading westward was the trail of the stolen herd.

"Thank Pete there's been no wind since yesterday," said Morgan. "The prints are still plain. Let's go."

For miles they followed the plainly marked trail, while the sun sank lower and strange lights and shadows played across the desert's burning face. Suddenly Lawlor uttered an exclamation.

"There's a canyon mouth ahead, and the track turns into it," he said. "Easy now! We don't want to run into another drygulchin'."

They slowed their pace and proceeded with caution. Reaching the gorge mouth they pulled up, peering and listening.

The canyon was not very wide and rock walled. Its floor was brush dotted and sparsely grown with grass. A little stream flowed from it, to quickly lose itself in the thirsty sands. No sound or movement evidenced in the canyon's shadowy depths.

"They went in here, all right," Lawlor muttered.

"Yes, and they came out again, too," Morgan replied, pointing to a line of hoof prints that dwindled away into the glowing south. "I don't believe there's anybody in there now, but we'd better make sure. You fellers stay here. I'm going to sneak in on foot and see what I can find out."

He slipped from his saddle and loosened his guns in their holsters.

"Careful," Lawlor cautioned.

Morgan nodded and eased into the gorge, hugging the rock wall and taking

advantage of all possible cover.

For several hundred yards the canyon ran straight, then it began to bend. Rounding the bend, Morgan saw several rough brush leantos built against the wall. In front of the leantos were the ashes of a fire. There was neither sight nor sound of any living thing.

After pausing a moment he glided forward again, tense and alert. He reached the empty leantos, felt of the ashes. They were cold.

He hurried back to his companions and told them what he discovered.

"Shall we wait for 'em here?" Lawlor asked.

Morgan shook his head. "Chances are they won't come back for days," he said. "This is no permanent hole-up. Just a gathering spot and a lay-over for the cows they run south. No, we'll keep on trailing and hope for a break."

About mid morning the next day, old John turned his bloodshot eyes on his range boss and swore with fervor.

"And you still figure a herd could be run across this burned out section of badlands without water on the way?"

MORGAN silently pointed at the line of hoof prints flowing on ahead of their laboring horses.

"Yeah, I see 'em," snorted Lawlor, "but they ain't there—can't be. Just one of them blasted mirages."

Morgan chuckled, then winced with the pain of his cracked lips. He peered ahead, puckering his eyes against the dancing heat devils. Far to the south was a dusky line of shadow.

"That must be brush growing along the dry bed of Lost River," he muttered to himself. "Chaparral."

He glanced to the east and saw another and fainter shadow that concerned him more. It was a wavering shadow, irregular of edge, rising and falling.

"Wind," he said to Lawlor, gesturing with his thumb. "I've been afraid of that all along. Once it gets to blowing good and arrives here, it'll fill the tracks in a jiffy."

They reached the belt of chaparral, which was tinder dry and stood stiff and motionless under the scorching sun. But even as they forced their weary horses through the tangle, the upper leaves began to stir under the first hot breath of the wind.

They reached the sloping bank of the river. Ten feet below was the bed—dry, packed sand with a film of gray dust topping it.

"Look at the hoof prints down there," said Morgan. "They were here, all right. Looks like they pranced around down there for an hour. And there's the trail leading up the far bank and heading south."

Lawlor swore wearily. He was too tired and thirsty to protest further. "Well, we had a nice ride, and I reckon this is the end of it," he growled. "The wind's risin' every minute and will fill the prints in a hurry. No trailin' 'em any farther. Lucky we made this stand of brush before the storm hit. It'll keep some of the dust off us, anyhow. This is apt to be the last ride we'll ever take. If we make it back to the hills it'll be a miracle."

He turned to his dusty, red-eyed hands. "Okay, boys," he said, "fan out through the brush and see if you can find that spring Tom keeps talkin' about."

But the search proved fruitless. One by one the weary seekers straggled back with negative head shakes. The wind was whipping the growth and sifting particles of dust through the air. Overhead the sky was filled with flying yellow shadows through which peered the weird red eye of the sun. All about was the moan and shriek of the wind and the dry rustling of the chaparral.

"But they came here and they left here, and they couldn't have done it without water," Morgan persisted.

Dismounting, he scrambled down the bank of the river bed and gazed around. There was no sign of hole or spring, just the dusty packed sand and the stark yellow clay of the banks.

Then abruptly he noticed a tinge of color where the far bank joined with the dusty bed—a faint, pale shimmer of green. Wonderingly, he made his way to it, and exclaimed in astonishment.

Just pushing through the earth were the tips of tiny plants. They were fresh and green.

Morgan stared at the unexplainable growth that could never have been born of dust and desiccation. His thoughts raced wildly. Forgotten fragments of desert lore began drifting across his mind, tales told by old-timers beside lonely camp fires. He turned and gazed at the hoof scarred sands at his feet. There seemed to be a definite pattern to the tracks, not what would be expected by the aimless churning of a milling herd. He walked down the dry bed, following the prints. A hundred yards or so farther on they abruptly ceased.

"Horses and cows both," he muttered. "They turned here. In the name of blazes, why?"

He hurried back the way he had come and continued up-stream. Again he halted. The multitude of hoof marks again came to an abrupt end. And here they were plainer and more deeply scored.

"And they turned back again up here," he muttered. "Blazes! I've got it!"

HE RUSHED back to where the others were clustered on the bank.

"Fork your broncs," he whooped. "Down onto the sand and ride back and forth, hard and steady."

"Have you gone completely loco?" demanded Lawlor.

"Don't argue, do as I tell you," Morgan shot back at him. "We'll have all the water we need in half an hour."

"Do as he says, boys," moaned old John. "Humor him. Keep him from gettin' violent. He's chain lightnin' on the draw and he never misses. If all of a sudden he imagines we're prairie chickens or somethin', we're goners."

Cursing and muttering, the bewildered punchers obeyed. Back and forth, back and forth galloped the disgusted horses. Clouds of dust arose from under their pounding hoofs at first, but to everybody's surprise it ceased to rise as the sand packed tighter.

"Say!" an excited cowboy yelled. "This stuff's gettin' soft and squshy!"

"My bronc's splashin'!" another whooped.

"By Godfrey, there's water risin' through the sand!" roared old John. "Well, if this don't take the shingles off the barn!"

Lawlor was right. There was an undoubted film of water covering the sands. Soon the thirsty horses were striving to thrust their muzzles into it.

"All right, get the broncs over to the bank," Morgan cautioned. "We'll have quicksand here before long and heck knows how deep it goes. If one of 'em busts through the crust, he's likely to go out of sight in a minute, and the hombre forkin' him, too."

"How in blazes did you figure it?" Lawlor demanded after their burning thirst was quenched.

[*Turn page*]

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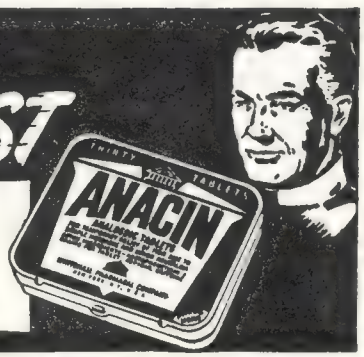

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"I caught on when I saw that patch of green stuff over there under the bank," Morgan explained. "I knew those shoots could never have come up without moisture somewhere close by. Then I remembered an old jigger telling about something like this over in Arizona. You see, there is a strata of hard rock that forms the real river bed, perhaps quite a way down. It is a sort of trough. The sand, you'll notice, is smooth round grains, the sort that makes quicksand when water flows over it. The sand becomes almost fluid and is held in suspension. But as the water level sinks, the sand on top quickly dries and packs hard.

"The water and the mixed sand beneath supports the crust and the closely packed grains prevents the water beneath from evaporating. No wonder there's such a heavy stand of brush along the banks. Chances are snow water stays down there all summer, and every time it rains, more water trickles through the sand to replenish the supply. Some of the water seeps out through the bank and provides enough moisture to sustain the chaparral with its wide-spreading root system. What we've brought up by packing the sand down and forcing the water to the surface will sink back in a couple of hours and the river bed will be dry and dusty again. Now do you see how Hanley runs his cows to Mexico?"

Old John tugged his mustache, shook his grizzled head.

"Reckon there's somethin' to bein' edducated, after all," he declared. "I never held much by book larnin', but I sure won't argue agin' it after this. Now what do we do?"

"Hole up and wait," Morgan instantly decided. "It's just about certain Hanley and his bunch will come back this way. They won't hang around the Border any longer than they have to. A patrol is likely to run onto them down there. They'll stop here for water, some time tonight, I figure, and then we'll hit 'em."

A long and tedious wait followed. The sun sank in a lurid setting of blood and flame. Overhead the wind still howled, but the thick growth kept off most of the flying dust. It was nearly full dark when Morgan suddenly exclaimed:

"Get set. Here they come."

The other men also heard the click of irons on the far bank. From their place of concealment they saw shadowy figures ride down to the river bed.

"They'll pound up some water and then they'll light a fire and throw together some grub, the chances are," Morgan whispered. "Wait till they get the fire going good and are all grouped around it. Then the odds will be evened up. We'll give 'em a chance to surrender but I'm scared they won't give up without a fight. Shoot straight!"

THE thudding hoofs on the dry sands continued for some time. The clean-cut sound changed to a sucking and gurgling. Soon the owlhoot band came streaming up the near bank. Close to the north wall of brush, that formed a windbreak, a fire was kindled. Preparation of a meal began. The owlhoots grouped around the fire talking in rough voices. Over all loomed a redhaired giant of a man. It was Hanley himself.

"All right," whispered Tom Morgan. "Let's go." He stepped forward into the little clearing flanked by the growth, his companions fanning away on either side. His voice rang out:

"Elevate! You're covered!"

The outlaws whirled at the sound. For an instant they stood paralyzed with astonishment. Then Red Hanley, with a roar of fury, went for his gun. The growth rocked and shivered to a roar of six-shooters.

Half the rustlers went down at the first flaming volley. The others scattered, blazing away at the cowhands. One ran straight through the fire, kicking glowing embers in every direction. They showered on the withered grass and the tinder-dry leaves and twigs beneath the growth. The fierce breath of the wind caught them and even as the guns blazed and thundered, a roaring sheet of flame shot upward.

"Back!" yelled Morgan. "Back to the horses! Hightail! All hell's bustin' loose."

The few owlhoots remaining alive also dived for their horses, but too late. The frenzied animals went tearing away through the burning brush, their panic stricken masters racing blindly after them.

All but Red Hanley. Morgan saw the tall leader dive over the river bank and land with a splash in the shallow water. Instantly he leaped after the outlaw chief, gun spurting fire. He plunged down the slope and into the water. Morgan was plowing for the far bank. He was already half way across. With a bellow of rage he whirled to face his pursuer. Morgan snapped a shot at him, knew he had missed. He slewed sideways as Hanley fired in return. The bullet missed him by an inch. He took deliberate aim and pulled trigger. The hammer clicked on an empty shell.

With a yell of triumph, Hanley threw down with his gun. But even as he lined sights, the yell changed to a scream of terror. Morgan, frantically striving to reload, stared with bulging eyes. Hanley had suddenly decreased in stature. He was an absurdly short mannikin, his shoulders barely rising above the surface of the shallow water. His gun fell from his hand, he thrashed madly with both arms. And Tom Morgan understood.

"He busted the crust!" Morgan gasped. "The quicksand's got him!"

At the same instant he felt the river bed heave and quiver beneath his own feet. Alive to his own deadly danger, he plunged madly for the bank. Behind him sounded a bubbling shriek chopped off as by the sweep of a great knife.

Gasping and panting, Morgan fought toward the shore. The sands gripped his knees. He hurled himself forward and his chest came down on solid ground. He clutched at boulders, clawed the hard earth with bleeding fingers. With a last superhuman effort he dragged his body free from the clinging muck.

A blast of searing heat struck his face. On the crest of the bank, flames were leaping and roaring. Stinging embers showered his body and hissed in the water. It seemed he had escaped death by suffocation only to succumb to a more agonizing one by fire. He hugged against the bank, forced his body beneath an overhanging shelf and lay coughing and choking, his wet clothes steaming from the heat. His head was whirling, his senses leaving him.

Gradually he realized that the heat was lessening. Embers no longer fell. The air was clearer and the wind appeared to be blowing itself out. Overhead the murk thinned. A shaft of moonlight struggled through and silvered the sinking waters. One spot near the center of the stream still swirled and eddied slightly. Morgan turned from it with a shudder and cautiously climbed the bank.

Beyond the smoking belt of growth, voices were calling anxiously. Morgan raised a reassuring shout in reply. But nearly an hour passed before he could cross the burned-over section and join his companions.

"Nobody bad hurt," Lawlor replied to his question. "The wideloopers? All gunshot or roasted. They won't raise the devil in this section any more. What happened to Hanley?"

Morgan told him. "I'll never forget the look on his face as he went under," he concluded. "What an awful way to die!"

"The sidewinder had it comin'," Lawlor growled. "Reckon right now the Devil is dryin' him out so he'll roast proper without sizzlin'. The boys caught those rustlers horses and the saddle pouches are full of dinero. Plenty to make up for the herd. Reckon we're all set to head for home."

"Right," said Morgan. "Let's get away from this hell-hole. I never want to see it again. Talk about raising the devil'. I raised one, all right!"

"A wet one," chuckled Lawlor. "Let's go!"

MAN from the EAST

By HOBART DONBAYNE

Dickenson grabbed Parish's wrist with both hands

RUSSELL DICKENSON was the only passenger in the coach when the west bound Wells Fargo stage pulled into the little cowtown called Bitter Creek. Dickenson was a tall dark haired young man dressed in Eastern clothes and he seemed out of place as he stepped out of the coach at the stage station.

"Passengers have a twenty minute rest here while we change horses," announced the old stage driver, as he swung down from his seat on the front of the vehicle. "You'll find food and refreshments in the station."

"Thanks for the information, driver," Dickenson said. "But this is as far as I go."

The driver nodded with a complete lack of interest and went on into the stage station. Two men had appeared and they got busy unhitching the tired four-horse double team that had pulled the stage for the past twelve miles through rough, hilly country.

"Reckon you must be Russell Dickenson," said a deep voice behind the new arrival.

Dickenson swung around and found himself facing a man as tall as he was and dressed in worn range clothes.

"I'm Dickenson," Dickenson said. "Who are you?"

"Pete Parish is the name," said the thin-faced dark-eyed man. "John Meredith sent me to town to get you and bring you out to the Flying M."

"Good," Dickenson said, picking up his traveling bag. "Let's go."

"Didn't figure on you having any baggage," Parish said, with a glance at the suitcase. "Or I would have brought the buckboard instead of an extra horse for you to ride out to the ranch." He frowned. "Tell you what—maybe you could leave that suitcase at the stage station and I'll drive into town and get it later with the buckboard."

"All right," Dickenson said. "I don't suppose I will need the suitcase right

Two cowpunchers lure Kid Russell into a foothills trap!

away." He turned toward the stage station. "I'll ask them to hold the suitcase for me."

"I'll take care of it for you." Parish took the suitcase and hurried into the station with it.

DICKENSON glanced up and down the dusty street of the cowtown. Weather beaten buildings lined either side of the street, and there were a few people moving about on the plank walks. Three horses stood at a hitching rail in front of a saloon across from the stage station.

A big, heavy-set man with a hard face, and who needed a shave came out of the stage station. He glanced casually at Dickenson and then strolled across the street to the hitching rail. He unfastened the reins of a powerful roan, swung into the saddle and headed out of town without looking back.

Parish soon came out of the station and hurried over to where the man from the East stood. "All right, Dickenson," he said. "They'll keep your suitcase until somebody comes and gets it. Our horses are over there at the rail across the street."

They walked over and Parish indicated the bay that Dickenson was to ride Parish unfastened the reins and swung into the saddle of a sorrel. Dickenson adjusted the stirrups on the bay so they were longer and more comfortable for a tall man.

"You've been around horses before," Parish said as he watched.

"Ridden a few of them," Dickenson said quietly, studying the brands of the bay and the sorrel. "We have them back East you know."

He unfastened the reins and swung into the saddle with casual ease. Pete Parish frowned and said nothing. They headed out of town riding side by side.

"I certainly was surprised when I got a letter from John Meredith two weeks ago in New York," Dickenson said. "Hadn't heard from him in years. Then he suddenly writes me insisting that I come out and visit him at the Flying M as soon as it is humanly possible. Said it was a matter of life and death—but wouldn't say any more until I got here."

"Why not?" asked Parish.

"He seemed to think that someone was reading his mail," said Dickenson. "Has there been any trouble out at the ranch, Parish?"

"Not that I know about," Parish said. "Meredith has been acting kind of funny lately, but he always was a strange sort of hombre. You're some relation of his, aren't you, Dickenson?"

"That's right." With his free hand Dickenson casually touched the folded telegram that he carried in the inside pocket of the coat of his suit. "I'm his nephew and nearest of kin."

"Thought so," said Parish. "Then if something was to happen to Meredith, you would be likely to inherit the Flying M."

"Guess I would," said Dickenson. "But I hope that nothing does happen to him." Dickenson laughed. "Imagine Kid Russell running a ranch."

"Kid Russell," said Parish. "That what they call you back East?"

"Sometimes," Dickenson said. "How far is the ranch from town?"

"Five miles south." Parish said.

Dickenson glanced up at the sun, and looked around at the rugged terrain over which they were traveling.

"Guess it will take us quite a while to get there," Dickenson said. "Since we are traveling north."

Parish cursed and reached for his gun. Dickenson did not seem in the least alarmed by the other man's menacing gesture.

"I've been wondering ever since we left town why, if you are from the Flying M, we are riding horses branded Box T," Dickenson said. "And why you have said nothing about my uncle having been dead for over a week."

"Too bad you had to be so smart," Parish said halting his sorrel and covering Dickenson with the gun. "My orders were to meet you and take you out o'

town, hold you prisoner for a while and then down you. Now it looks like I might as well get it over with in a hurry."

"Not unless you are a bigger fool than I think, you won't down me now, Parish," Dickenson said calmly as he also halted the bay and sat in the saddle facing the other man. "Don't forget that you left my suitcase at the stage station—that everybody in Bitter Creek knows we left town together. If I should be found dead a lot of the people back in the town would be quite convinced you did the killing."

PARISH scowled as he thought over what Dickenson had just said. Finally he nodded. "Reckon you might be right," he said. "Guess you'll have to stay alive a little longer."

"Thanks," Dickenson said dryly. "I'm overcome by your kindness and consideration. And now that's settled, what happens next?"

"We keep on riding," Parish said as he dropped his gun into the holster. "I'm holding you a prisoner until I make up my mind what to do, Dickenson."

"Nothing like seeing the country on a nice warm day," said Dickenson. "Besides I'm wondering who thought up this idea of having you kidnap me. You certainly haven't brains enough to have got the idea all by yourself, Parish."

Parish uttered a snort that sounded so much like that of a horse that the bay and the sorrel seemed surprised. Parish dropped back and motioned for Dickenson to ride on ahead.

Dickenson grinned and headed on northward. That with Parish riding behind him he risked getting a bullet in his back apparently did not concern him in the least. They traveled across a stretch of open country and then as they approached some brush and trees a rider on a roan loomed into view, heading in their direction.

"I've been wondering when he would show up," Dickenson said as he recognized the big man he had seen ride out of town. "Had a feeling you two might be working together. What's his name?"

"Mark Terrell," Parish said before he thought. "He owns a ranch over west of the Flying M."

"I know," said Dickenson. "And you work for him—that's why we are riding a couple of Box T horses."

"How do you know all that?" Parish stared at Dickenson in amazement.

"I always go in for mind-reading on Tuesdays," Dickenson said.

"But this is Friday!" Parish protested, and looked more baffled than ever.

The two men halted their horses as Mark Terrell rode up.

"We've been waiting for you, Terrell," Dickenson said. "And if you ask me, you picked the wrong man for this job. Pete has been telling me all about it—how the two of you planned to down me, knowing that I was John Meredith's nearest of kin. With no one to take over the Flying M, you were positive you would be able to buy the ranch for far less than it is really worth."

If looks could kill then from the way Terrell was glaring at Parish, the thin-faced man had been dead ever since Dickenson started talking.

"I didn't tell him any such thing," Parish protested wildly. "When a man pays me a hundred dollars to do a job, I'm not fool enough to talk about what's to be done to earn the money."

"Best acrobat I ever saw," Dickenson said dryly. "Every time Pete opens his mouth he puts his foot in it."

"What you know, or what you don't know doesn't matter much in the long run, Dickenson," Terrell said quietly. "I didn't figure on Parish being quite so dumb—but he brought you out here and that's the important thing."

"So now the two of you just put a couple of bullets in me, make sure that I'm dead and ride away," Dickenson said. "And if you do, then Parish will be blamed for my murder. Folks are bound to remember we left town together."

"You really think that we are going to shoot you?" Terrell looked shocked. "I sure never planned anything that crude."

His voice grew hard. "You see, you are going to have an accident, Dickenson. I'm going to beat you to death. Then Pete and I will swear that your horse ran away and threw you, and that's how you got killed."

"Sounds like a good time will be had by all," Dickenson said as he swung out of the saddle, dropping the reins and ground-hitching the bay. "I might as well warn you that I'm not going to stand around sobbing in my beard while you try to beat me up, Terrell."

Terrell merely grinned wickedly as he dismounted. Parish also slid out of leather. Terrell weighed at least twenty pounds more than Dickenson, and he looked and acted as though he considered himself quite a fighter. Dickenson tossed his hat aside, but he did not have a chance to remove his coat before Terrell rushed at him.

From that moment on Terrell found he had tangled with a human wildcat. Dickenson landed smashing rights and lefts to the big man's face and body, ducking and weaving so that Terrell couldn't get in one solid blow. Dickenson worked on the big man as methodically as a lumberjack chopping down a giant tree. He was giving Terrell the beating of his life.

FOR what seemed hours the two men kept at it while Parish watched dazedly, but actually the fight did not last more than fifteen or twenty minutes. Finally Terrell was staggering around groggily, out on his feet, but refusing to quit. He just couldn't believe this man from the East could deal out such punishment.

"I'll get him, Mark," Parish said finally. "We'll clean him up good."

Parish rushed out behind Dickenson, drawing his gun with the intention of hitting the Easterner over the head with the barrel of the Colt. Dickenson suddenly whirled and smashed a fist to Parish's face that caught him just below the right eye. There was so much force behind the blow that it knocked Parish completely off his feet and he went down hard, the gun dropping from his hand.

"Now I've got you," Terrell muttered, rushing at Dickenson.

He ran right into a couple of hard fists —one to the heart and the other to the chin. Terrell went over and sprawled on his back out cold.

Parish grabbed up the gun with his left hand and staggered to his feet. Dickenson grabbed Parish's arm with both hands and twisted so that the thin-faced man was forced to drop the Colt.

"I've had enough of both of you," Dickenson said.

He swung hard and knocked Parish to the ground unconscious.

When Terrell and Parish came to their senses they found that their arms were neatly and tightly bound behind their backs. Russell Dickenson was seated on a rock smoking a cigarette.

"You two look like you were kicked by a couple of mules," Dickenson said. "If I must be modest about it. Unfortunately you two didn't learn enough about me before you got the idea of beating me up."

"What do you mean?" Terrell asked sullenly as he sat up.

"I told Pete that they called me Kid Russell back East," Dickenson said. "And that's the name I use in the ring."

"You knew he was Kid Russell and yet you let me fight him?" Terrell growled, glaring at Parish.

"The name didn't mean anything to me," said Parish, who was also sitting up. "The feller you told me to get was Russell Dickenson."

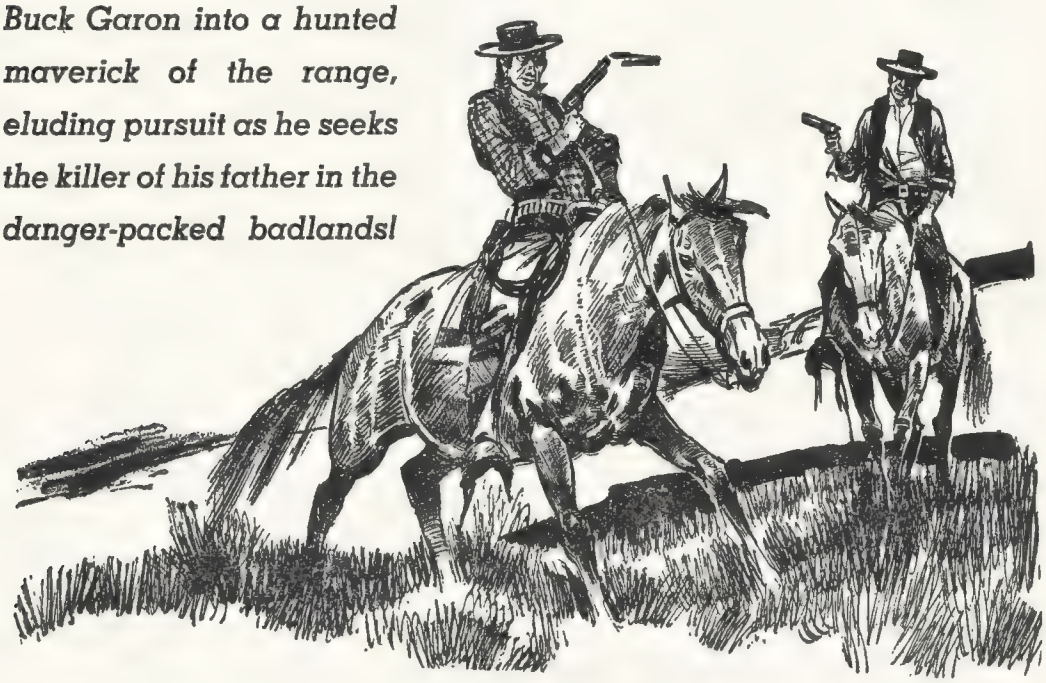
"He's smart, too," said Dickenson. "Smart enough to take a couple of would-be killers back to Bitter Creek and turn them over to the sheriff. You know I think I'll like owning the Flying M at that. I grew up on that ranch—went East when I was twenty and decided that I wanted to be a boxer."

He got to his feet and they saw he had their guns in the side pockets of his coat.

"I'll help you on your horses," Dickenson said. "Always glad to be of assistance to a couple of friendly neighbors!"

BULLET HARVEST

Frontier tragedy—grim, raw, quivering—turns Buck Garon into a hunted maverick of the range, eluding pursuit as he seeks the killer of his father in the danger-packed badlands!



CHAPTER I

"Saddle Job"

IT WAS easy to see who was boss. Sam Shader bulged with self-importance—from his overhanging stomach, which sagged heavily on his bottom shirt button, to his red, pudgy neck. He had just finished cussing the three sullen and silent punchers at the corral gate when someone reined up behind him and he heard a quiet:

"I heard you're hiring, here on the Broken Arrow."

Sam Shader whirled around swiftly and fiercely.

Hardly more than twenty, the young stranger was. In black sateen shirt that hugged wide shouders. Work chaps with work scars on them. Fragments of many brands.

"Hirin'?" Sam Shader exploded. "Shucks, No! I'm firin!"

He was about to tell the newcomer to get, when something in the youthful face caused his yellow-brown eyes to narrow speculatively. It was a trouble-shadowed face—the face of a man twice twenty years. Experience, some of it bitter, was indelibly stamped in the hard line of the jaw, and in the blue eyes that met his scowling scrutiny unwaveringly.

"I'm offerin' forty and found for a job of work," Sam Shader decided

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Buck Garon kneed his roan straight toward the oncoming pair

A Novelet by
SYL MacDOWELL

abruptly. "But get this," he added, jerking a scornful thumb at the disgruntled trio, "I want no more saddle bums!"

"We hired out to ride!" one of the men growled defensively. "Not that other stuff."

"A saddle job, isn't it?" the young rider asked.

Sam Shader spat in the dust and jerked a curt nod. The new man promptly swung down, flipped reins over his blue roan's head and started for the cavvy gate.

"Lug your duffle to the bunkhouse, yonder," Shader commanded. "Then hustle up to the house. Sign on and get yore orders."

He swaggered off. One of the punchers, lean, slovenly and unshaven, thrust himself in front of the new Broken Arrow hand. "You don't realize what you're lettin' yourself in for, youngster," he stated patronizingly.

"Reckon that's my worry."

The lean man winked broadly at his two companions. "Oughtn't we to tell the pilgrm what old man Shader means by 'a saddle job'?" he drawled.

The others snickered.

"Better tell him to shed them bull-hide pants. And his new-lookin' boots," one of them retorted.

THE lean puncher made a sweeping gesture toward the wide, green meadow bottoms, newly-fenced, where a high-line ditch, bank full from some source in the hills beyond, contoured the meadow's upper edge.

"Old Shader expected us to irrigate that danged alfalfy," he announced. "Sure, it's a saddle job, all right. With a shovel on your shoulder."

"Ridin' ditchline," put in one of his companions. "Muckin' around in that sticky adobe down there, like a blasted pollywog."

"Up night and day, changin' the water from one check to another," spoke up the other, "patchin' breaks."

"A job for a slave," finished the lean puncher. "We told old Shader to go plumb to blazes. So will any other self-respectin' cowhand."

The young stranger had listened attentively. He spoke now.

"Reckon I'm stayin'."

The lean puncher's mouth sagged for a surprised instant. Then it snapped shut angrily.

"All right, button, it's your funeral. We gave you fair warnin'," he said, dropping the top bar of the cavvy gate and stepping inside. Then he added ominously:

"We'll be seein' you again."

They quickly saddled and were off. The new rider put up his horse, shouldered his slicker-wrapped soogans and carried them over to the bunkhouse, where he flung them in an empty bunk. A few moments later, he faced Sam Shader on the ranchhouse porch.

"What name you go by?" Shader demanded.

The youngster hesitated a shade of a second before answering. Then:

"Garon. Buck Garon," he said.

"Garon, huh? Well now, Garon, it ain't usual to ask where a man comes from, not in this country. But she's sort of unsettled here, at times. Me, I've seen things happen to stray riders. Now just in case, where at did yuh come from?"

Buck Garon shrugged.

"Since I was fifteen," he replied gravely, "I've worked on about forty-eleven spreads. In seven states."

"Tumbleweed, eh? Got any kith or kin?"

This time a harsh smile flickered at Buck Garon's mouth corners.

"I won't be puttin' you to the trouble of keeping death statistics," he said. "When do I go to work?"

"Now, pronto!" rasped Sam Shader. "Listen here, and I'll post you on what to do. First off—"

"I know my job," Buck Garon interrupted.

"What's that?" cried Shader. "How can you know it?"

"Your recent help put me wise to part of it," Buck Garon told him. "The rest, I took note of as I rode past that lower field where the waste water has drowned out several acres of young alfalfa. It'll need reseeding."

Sam Shader's brows puckered thoughtfully. The youngster had savvy, he reflected. He picked up information at a lope. Maybe he'd get some work out of this one.

"Go to it," he said crisply, and went into the house.

Two hours later Sam Shader rode down onto the meadow, where he saw his new hand shoveling steadily, mending a low stretch of ditch.

"Dig her from the bottom," he ordered tersely as soon as he came in earshot.

Buck Garon paused, resting a booted foot on the shovel.

"Low point along here. Too deep already this ditch is. The bank needs

raising." He lifed a heavy shovelful and proceeded with the narrow earthen levee that was half-built.

Sam Shader blinked. He was accustomed to having his orders obeyed, not ignored. He opened his mouth, then thought better of it and closed it again. He looked across the gently sloping field, where the water was spreading evenly, soaking to root-depth as it went.

The waste pond, down by the fence, was lowering from a drain ditch his new hand had cut to a gully beyond the fence.

BUCK GARON worked on steadily, as though oblivious of his presence. Sam Shader cleared his throat noisily.

"After your first payday," he stated, "your pay goes up five dollars. That is, pervidin' I don't fire you before then."

As though angered at his own burst of generosity, Sam Shader reined roughly around and returned to the ranch buildings.

Buck Garon was not fired. As the spring wore on, the bunkhouse slowly filled. Forty a month was small pay, and the Broken Arrow did not attract the cream of the cowboy crop. It was a cull outfit that Sam Shader assembled. Furtive-eyed men who talked little, lazy ones who did less, lame old-timers and raw, roaming kids. Booze-fighters, ill-tempered incompetents, chuckline riders who stayed only long enough to fill their belly-wrinkles before drifting on.

The shovel-and-saddle job was not Buck Garon's for long. Sam Shader soon learned that the youngster's ranching knowledge extended beyond it.

It happened in the corral one Sunday morning. A new cowhand, an oldster known as "Lefty" Williams, had snaked a squealing Broken Arrow buckskin colt out of the milling cavvy and cinched his kak on its fighting back. Williams was not a natural southpaw. Some old injury to his right arm had limited the use of that member. He wrenched the arm in mounting. Had hardly hit leather before the buckskin had the bit.

Three jumps more and Lefty Williams hit the fence. The buckskin cleared the corral gate. Bucking, with empty stirrups flying, it tore out of the ranchyard. Most of the outfit were fencebirds that morning. They ran to catch up their own mounts. But before the pursuit could begin, Buck Garon saw the rampaging buckskin from the meadow field.

He leaped to his blue roan and angled for the runaway, shaking out his rope as he rode. His loop circled, and in one well-aimed throw he had the buckskin by the neck. Two quick hitches on his saddle horn, with the roan braced back, and he peeled off, inched his way along the taut rope, and Sam Shader and the outfit boiled down from the ranch buildings in time to witness a superb exhibition of courage and skill.

The buckskin had the spirit of a tiger. But Buck Garon was unshakable. Ten whirlwind minutes of it and the animal halted, spraddle-legged and blowing, completely subdued. A little trickle of blood showed at the rider's nose, but he gave no other sign of the terrific jolting the wrangling feat had cost him.

Sam Shader grunted with grudging admiration:

"Your prize for that performance, youngster, is old Williams' job."

"But Williams—"

"I was a fool to hire that cripple. Look, now. We start calf brandin' next week at the corral on Hambone Mountain, thirty miles up. Get yoreself started up there, patch the corral if it's in disrepair and stay on till the outfit comes. Tools and rations in the line rider's cabin, there by the brandin' corral."

They started back toward the ranchyard. Lefty Willams, white-lipped and suffering, sat by the corral gate.

"It—it feels like a cracked rib," he

gasped as he looked up.

"You're fired, you has-been!" snapped Shader. "Collect up your duffle, and git your time!"

The old rider stared at Shader unbelievingly.

"You—you mean you'd let a man bust himself up? A man in your pay? Then turn him out, like a wore-out pair of boots?"

"Like a cast-off boot, that's it exactly!" Shader declared. "The Broken Arrow ain't no old dodderer's home!"

With a dazed expression, Williams got up and started for the bunkhouse at a limp. Buck Garon stepped down from the buckskin, passed the reins to Shader, and helped the hurt puncher. At the bunkhouse, he rolled the old fellow's blankets, then caught up the horse he had ridden to the ranch and saddled it.

When he returned to the bunkhouse, Lefty Williams wore a gunbelt. He was loading up a Colt. His face was a mask of hate.

"It's the end of the trail for me, anyhow!" he said hoarsely. "But I aim to exterminate that hyena before I go!"

CHAPTER II

Dead Man's Gun

BUCK GARON blocked the bunkhouse doorway as Williams started out on his murderous mission.

"Start thinkin', Lefty," he remonstrated. "Use your head. Cool off. It ain't the thing to do, killin' a man for firing you. You know it ain't."

Williams thrust the Colt muzzle into the younger man's middle.

"Stand aside, boy!" he gritted. "I mean it! Move!"

Buck Garon deliberately braced both hands on the doorframe. He held Williams' eyes with his own. The old puncher's trigger hand wavered a little. But his voice was obdurate.

"Don't compel me," he breathed. "I never figured you was Sam Shader's friend."

"Im your friend, Lefty. Save up your nerve for a trip to town, to the doctor."

"Without a dime to pay him, ain't that fine! Except the measly week's pay from Shader!"

Buck Garon unbuttoned the flap of his shirt pocket, extracted a tight-folded ten-dollar bill, and thrust it into Williams' vest.

"That's settled with the doc, Lefty," he said. "Your pay'll carry you to the next job." He lowered his hand and thrust the gun aside. "Holster it, oldtimer. Get going."

Lefty Williams' anger suddenly left him. He looked at the end of the ten-dollar bill that poked from his vest pocket, then at the man in front of him.

"Son," he croaked, "it ain't often a man meets up with—with yore kind." The six-gun still dangled loosely in his hand. He ran a hand across his sunken eyes. "I seen red for a spell, and it's fact. I—I reckon you kep' me from a swingin' finish. I—I'll do like you say."

With sudden resolve, he holstered the Colt. He unbuckled the cartridge-heavy belt. He handed it over.

"Here, it's for security."

"But your Colt's worth more'n a ten-spot, plenty more, Lefty."

"Maybeso, a little. But that ain't it. A hot-headed old cuss like me, he ain't fit to lug a gun, not no more. And let a man hand you a piece of advice with it, son. Git out of this cowpuncher trade. It's a fool's work, a trail that leads nowhere. Look at me. Thirty years of it. I've stopped lead in other men's quarrels, took the brunt of it, and what has it got me?"

He barked a hard, cynical laugh.

"Not even a ticket to the poorhouse!" he finished bitterly.

Buck Garon took the gun, silently then.

"We'll meet up again, maybe."

"I'm hopin'."

They shook hands. And Lefty Williams limped out, clambered painfully to saddle, and rode slowly away from the Broken Arrow.

Not until he was well on his way for the branding camp on Hambone Mountain did Buck Garon draw the gun to examine it. As he did so, his eyes went wide, darkened stormily. As quickly, they narrowed to cold, fighting glints.

The Colt was silver-framed, engraved elaborately. And carved in the smooth-worn bone butt he read:

James Garon Wardell.

That was his real name. It had been his father's name, too. That, and a nearly forgotten scene in his early childhood, was all that Buck Garon knew of his past.

But it was enough. Twenty years of orphaned wandering, a stray waif who had prematurely hardened into young manhood, he had come upon the clue he had sought for so many weary years. So long as he could remember, his one aim in life was to find his father's killer. To even up that evil score. Just what did this gun in the possession of old Lefty Williams portend?

Buck Garon camped that night at the head of the Broken Arrow ditchline where a spring gushed from a fern-grown crevice in a granite cliff. He bedded down by a thicket of jackpine and lay awake for hours under the stars, his father's gun pillowed beneath his head.

MANY times had he struggled for a clearer remembrance of that tragic scene—his earliest memory. Distinct enough, though he was only four years old, as nearly as he could reckon, when it happened.

His father and mother lived in a log house. Where, Buck had not the slightest way of knowing. Flowing water and murmuring trees had been his babyhood lullaby. There was the sound of them that day when his father stooped down in the doorway to mend the broken wheel of a little red toy wagon for his small son.

Feeding cattle stirred in a sunny glade at the approach of a rider. His father jerked to his feet. A gun cracked, smoke puffed from the rider's hand. He whirled and circled behind the house. The baby's mother rushed out as his father slumped down. She knelt beside him. Buck remembered blood. Remembered his father groping out with a hand that shuddered and went limp as it caressed his head for the last time.

After that, confusion. The crackling of flames in the dry shake roof of the log house. His mother ran, hugging him to her breast. She rode with him, wrapped against her. It was an interminable ride, days of it. Then gray skies, cold—snow.

In a snowstorm strangers found him, snuggled to his mother's cooling bosom. She was dying. They buried her there. Then there was more travel, and hunger that he would never forget. A blank interval then, which was curtained in forgetfulness.

A church orphanage was next. He ran away from it when he was ten. He learned the wiles of a wild hunted thing, and like a wild thing he lived, aimlessly wandering a hilly wilderness. Of the animals that roamed he had less fear than of his own kind. He killed sage hens with rocks. It was berry time in the canyons. He bedded in dry leaves like a deer. A bear sniffed him one night as he slept. The tracks were there next morning.

That chapter ended when he crept into a cow camp one night in quest of food. A rider coming in from night herding caught him. The name, James Garon Wardell, he dropped it then. Told the aroused, curious outfit that he was Buck Garon. Stubbornly refused to tell more.

He learned to ride with them, helped

drive the herd to the railroad, was taken in by a kindhearted wife of a storekeeper.

Spring came, and he ran away again. Always was that urge to find the log cabin, the place of his birth. And as his understanding grew, the resolve to avenge his father took form and he grew up with a hate that he never uttered, but never forgot.

He worked his way after that, and at fifteen was a seasoned cowhand, skilled in the hazardous trade of rope and saddle. The rigorous life developed him into early manhood, lithe, tireless.

Buck Garon relived all this that night before he slept. That incident with Lefty Williams had added one important memory to that early tragedy which haunted his every waking hour. His father, as he fell, had reached out for his gun. It fell from his hand when he reached out to caress the bewildered child beside him.

And this Colt that Lefty Williams had handed him was that same gun. What did Lefty Williams know? Was he the guilty one?

Buck Garon was devoured with the almost unconquerable desire to trail the old puncher and find out. But the code of duty was stronger. First, to reach Sam Shader's branding corral on Hambone Mountain, put it in order, finish his job. Then—

He awoke, still planning in his dreams. It was gray daylight. Without pausing to kindle a fire, he grasped his rope and started out after his hobbled roan. Halfway across a grass flat he tripped on a strand of rusted wire, deep-buried under the tangled mat of growth and decay.

He gripped the wire, hauled up a long strand. In this way he traced the remnants of an old, fallen fence which once had enclosed the grass flat and the spring.

IT WAS not until he caught up his horse, saddled it, and started uptrail that he glimpsed the tumbledown remnants of a stone chimney almost hidden in a thicket of scrub oak. He rode over to it. The scrub oak grew on a mound where once a house had stood. Charred particles of logs were all that was left. An almost terrible premonition gripped him. He knew this place!

This, at last, was his homecoming! The fates had worked it strangely. He knew it when he glimpsed something, half-buried beside his horse. He leaped down. From that melancholy mound where a home had once been, where the slab-rock doorstep remained, he picked up that souvenir of the long ago—the broken wheel of a tiny, toy wagon. Particles of red paint still clung to it.

The stars he had brooded under during the night had been the stars of his destiny. The old urge was stronger now than any sense of duty to Sam Shader and the Broken Arrow. Buck Garon did not proceed up Hambone Mountain. He swung down-slope, and off towards the town. The acid of hate in his blood was almost a madness.

When he reached the town, the blue roan was lathered to the knees. The place was named Dry Lake. A small place, the counterpart of a thousand other Western towns he had known, where corrals and loading chutes beside a railroad spur gave excuse for a cluttered settlement.

Above the post office and store he located the doctor's office. He burst in. The doctor twisted around in a swivel chair that complained groaningly under his weight. He was a bulky man with a horseshoe fringe of gray hair around a bald head. He looked over the top of his glasses owlishly.

"A man with a busted rib. Man named Williams. Was he here?" Buck Garon shot the question breathlessly.

The doctor's heavy hands explored the arms of his swivel chair.

"Friend of yours?" he inquired mildly.

"I'm doing the asking!"

The doctor was startled at the whiplash crack of the words. His head in-

clined forward, eyes riveted on the Colt that hugged his abrupt caller's left thigh.

"The reason I asked that," he observed dryly, "is, it sometimes pays to keep a mighty short tongue in my business."

Buck Garon's patience was shorter than the medico's tongue. It snapped now.

"You keep a record of folks you patch up! Where?"

The doctor chuckled with an uneasy effort.

"Right here," he replied, patting his hip pocket. "In my wallet. A cash record."

He was unprepared for the next move. Agile as a cat, Buck Garon leaped, kicked the chair, and the doctor sprawled to the floor. He stared up into the muzzle of the Colt, as Buck Garon's left hand was thrust into the hip pocket and roughly jerked out a leather money sack by the drawstrings. He stepped back, opened it, and spilled the contents onto the floor.

It was there. The ten-dollar bill he had lent Lefty Williams. The creases of its tight folding made it unmistakable. The old puncher, then, had been there. Where was he now?

Before Buck Garon could ask, steps sounded on the stairs. The crash of the doctor on the floor had aroused someone below. A voice came:

"What's goin' on up there, Doc?"

The doctor croaked: "Look out! Holdup!

He scrambled under the desk at his visitor's menacing move. Dropping the ten-spot, Buck Garon spun around and raced for the stairs. They were narrow and steep. Halfway down, he collided with a man who made an unsuccessful effort to shrink back into the wall.

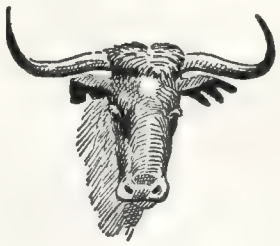
MORE to retain his balance than in hostility, the man clutched Buck Garon's arm. But his hold was jarred loose almost instantly as a hard fist exploded against his jaw. He went end over end to the bottom of the stairs.

Buck Garon, in a leaping descent, jumped over him. There was a customer in the store—a rancher in a big JB hat, armed. He whipped out a six-gun, and it roared. The slug slashed the front of Buck Garon's black shirt, grazing flesh.

He shot back instinctively. It was his life or the other man's. The rancher's right leg crumpled. He fired again, on an elbow, as Buck Garon sprang out into the street, and an avalanche of broken window glass chimed in with the roar of the six-gun.

With a long leap Buck Garon hit leather and the blue roan was off. There was no pause in the getaway until horse and rider were a mile from town.

There appeared to be no pursuit. Buck Garon's wild ride had brought smarting to the bullet crease across his flat, gaunt middle. He tore his neckerchief into strips and bandaged it as best he could. He gritted harsh blessings on the doctor's stupid yell that had created new difficulties in his search for Lefty Williams' trail-sign.



Then he rode on. The well-traveled trail carried him towards a mountain pass in the south. Somewhere he would hit a creek ford, soft ground, where he would know if another lone rider had come that way ahead of him.

He shucked the one empty shell from the Colt and reloaded the chamber. He dry-sighted on several objects as he passed—rock and brush clumps. For sixteen years a murderer had gone unpunished. Savage anticipation made the youth forget his wound.

CHAPTER III

Rustlers

SAM SHADER was chagrined at the shortage of spring calves. That chagrin became a definite worry as he neared the Hambone Mountain outfit.

At the corral an unpleasant explanation confronted him. Mute evidence of what had become of his calf crop was there in the dust churned by many hoofs, and the bawling presence of Broken Arrow cows bereaved of their young.

The cabin showed sign of recent occupancy and was raided of all provisions. He stormed at his men:

"Trail 'em! Find which way the thievin' lobo went!"

"There was three of 'em," spoke up one of the riders.

"He had it planned, then!" Shader said. "Had his rustler crowd lined up!"

"Who did?"

"That smooth rascal, young Garon!"

"Shucks, he wasn't no thief."

"Shut up, you! Git onto that herd sign. I'll follow him to Jericho and back! Listen, all of you! Shoot on sight when we come up with Garon!"

The man who had protested wagged his head dubiously. "I don't know, now, whether I care for any of this."

"Count me out," chirped another.

"You yellow pups!"

"No, Shader. Just plain white. You got no proof Garon was in on this."

"Then where is he?"

That was unanswerable. But the first speaker made the logical observation.

"Besides you, Shader, only three of us pack guns. We ain't enough people to shoot it out with three tough hombres. Besides, forty per ain't gun pay. There's a sheriff in Dry Lake. He gets paid to take other folks' chances."

"Quittin', huh? You're a soft crowd! Just saddle bums, not the breed which used to ride this range! Me, I bought what I wanted with lead, in my day, and I had backers, plenty!"

"Let the law back you. I've had my say."

The others murmured agreement. Fuming but helpless, Sam Shader left them to bunch what yearlings they could find. He rode for town.

Some of the excitement that followed the black-shirted rider's strange raid had died down in Dry Lake, but the storekeeper had built up a highly imaginative yarn out of it.

"I battled with the holdup feller, and sure saved the doc's hide, also his pocketbook. Yessir, I tussled with him, there on the stairs, and if I hadn't been dodgin' Macey Cline's bullets, I'd have held! Young jigger, wiry as a bobcat."

"He let on as how he was after a fellow named Williams," the doctor informed Shader.

"That old varmint, he was in on it, too, huh? They had their heads together, sure enough."

"Didn't sound as though they was in cahoots, exactly," the doctor demurred. "More like he was trouble huntin'."

Sam Shader frowned. "Some dodge," he declared, with a careless gesture. "To put us off the scent. Where's the sheriff?"

"Let me see, now," mused the doctor. "It was last Monday, the second jigger was here. The young one."

"The sheriff took out after him that night," jabbered the storekeeper.

""Huh? And I counted on him—"

"Just when," the doctor interrupted, "was yore stock stolen, would you say?"

"How can I say till I find the herd-sign?" snapped Shader. "I've heard enough palaver. Am I ridin' out on a outlaw hunt alone?"

"If Macey Cline was in shape—" the doctor started to say.

"And if I wasn't tied down here," added the storekeeper.

"Maybe the sheriff over at Salida

won't sidestep!" flamed Shader. "My guess is, the rustlers headed south anyhow, into the next county! Wait'll I cut their sign!"

HE STAMPED out of the store, heaved his bulk into saddle, and rode furiously out of Dry Lake.

Buck Garon's search was as barren of assistance. He dared not make inquiry for Williams at any ranch, because he knew word would spread fast of the Dry Lake shooting. He hoped the man he had been compelled to shoot was not dead, but no qualms of conscience assailed him. His thoughts were filled with his one purpose: to find Lefty Williams. It came to him now, in that last conversation with the old-timer, that he had admitted gun fracases. Had thrown lead in other men's wars, as well as his own.

He was convinced that Williams was his man. He would give him time to confess. Then he would shoot him down, even as his father had been shot down. In cold blood. Without a chance to draw.

Once again, Buck Garon lived off the wilderness that swallowed him. He rode the ridges, looked down on several ranches at a cautious distance, was forever vigilant for a glimpse of his quarry.

On the third day he came on tracks. They were less than twenty-four hours old. They wound along the face of a rimrock, and brought him to a small spring that trickled into a pool.

Here the man ahead of him had alighted, watered his horse, and had drunk. In the ooze at the edge of the pool was the imprint of a hand as the man had stretched out to slake his thirst.

Just one handprint—a left hand!

Buck Garon's pulse leaped hotly. He had stumbled onto Williams' trail, no doubt remaining.

His early lore served him in good stead now. He could track a man as he had once tracked meat-kills. The trail, at times almost imperceptible in the granite, led him around a shoulder of a long mountain spur, down into a little valley, up the far slope, and there, hidden in dense timber, was the trampled ground where a herd had passed, headed south.

Williams' sign followed the herd-trail. It was easier going now, for the horse tracks were plain in the dusty wake of the cattle. It was obvious that Williams was after a job with that outfit on ahead.

At nightfall, haggard and weary, Buck Garon looked down on a meadow where a campfire gleamed. Herd dust was in his nostrils, and he heard the faint, distant voices of the herd. He drew, twirled the Colt cylinder, and with grim lips reined the blue roan down toward the campfire. To pay off a debt long overdue.

He entered the small circle of firelight with a final burst of speed and saw a man scramble from his blankets, seize a saddle carbine, and, without challenge or warning, aim and fire it.

Buck Garon felt the bullet's breath pass close by his face. A touch on the rein, and the roan reared and turned. The man crouched by the fire was levering another cartridge into the carbine.

In this hectic bewildering instant the young avenger saw his man. Lefty Williams, his face much thinner than when he had seen it last—almost the face of a cadaver by the flickering firelight, was bound to the trunk of a small oak. Seated at the base of it, he was roped firmly and with his legs stretched out on the ground.

A desperate yell came from the old-timer:

"Vamoose, son! There's two more yonder, with the herd. Rustlers!"

The man by the fire let go again with the carbine. Powder flame needled out, and lead whacked the cantle of Buck Garon's saddle, flipping his right sleeve. Enough time had been wasted. He threw down on the rifle man.

The old Colt sounded the third re-

port. The man by the fire was making a scrambling run for the outer rim of darkness. But he had delayed too long. The Colt's slug chopped him down. He struck on his face. His hat flew off and the carbine was knocked from his hands.

BUCK GARON recognized his assailant, then. It was the lean, unshaven puncher that Sam Shader had fired that day Garon arrived at the Broken Arrow. Lefty Williams raised a feeble cheer and struggled at his bonds.

Buck Garon heard the other two riders coming. It was too late to escape. His line of retreat would have taken him back through the arena of firelight.

He kneed the roan straight toward the oncoming pair, gun gripped against him, eyes strained for that first, telling glimpse. There could be no prelude to this unwarned encounter. Survival would depend on the fastest trigger, the keenest eye.

A blur of horse and rider crossed his line of vision, but the Colt sights were a part of the moonless night. The early stars alone could guess the fated outcome. The Colt stabbed the dark three times, fast. An answering flame-streak mingled its noise with the last shot. But it was aimed skyward. A throaty noise, and the f-flump of a falling body.

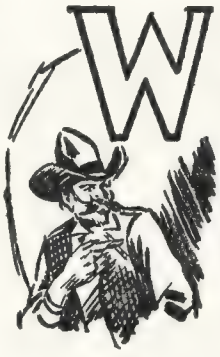
The other herd guard swirled onto the scene between Buck and the man he had downed. With only two shots left in the Colt, Buck hurled himself from saddle, struck yielding turf, rolling like a ball. He flapped his lean length out on the ground. He saw his man against the stars, pausing uncertainly, his gun groping out.

They fired in unison. Whizzing dust stung the side of Buck Garon's face. He rolled and fired again, his last shot.

The rider was almost over him. Buck saw him stiffen with a spasmodic jerk, and shriek resoundingly as he clawed at his breast. He slumped forward, clamped onto the saddle-horn, and digging his spurs deep was off in the night before Buck could reload. He heard the man's strangling cough as he fled, and knew that he would not go far.

CHAPTER IV

Bullet Harvest



WITH Colt cylinder filled, Buck was up and rushing over to the lean man who was struggling weakly toward the fallen carbine. He reached him in time to thwart the effort.

The lean man's stricken eyes stared up from his ghastly face.

"Y-you!" he groaned. "Doin' old Shader's d-dirty work still, huh? As for me, I—I'm done for!"

He collapsed. Buck hurled the carbine over toward the blankets. He hurried to Williams and without a word cut loose the rope.

"I'd about given up!" gabbled the old puncher, reeling to his feet. "I sure am in your debt now, son!"

He made a lurching move toward his deliverer, as though to embrace him in frenzied relief. Buck thrust him back against the tree, roughly. His eyes were like hot, livid coals.

"This gun," he snapped. "Where and when did you get it?"

Lefty Williams' bony face revealed no guilt. It was like that of a child who has been struck a needless blow.

"Wh-why, shucks," he panted in broken phrases, "what's that got to do with this?"

A thud of hoofs beyond the fire chopped the speech short. A loud, harsh command rang out:

"Reach, the pair of you!" Then: "Crack down on 'em, Sheriff, if they budge from there!"

Sam Shader dashed into view, every

bulge in him exuding gloating triumph. His six-gun covered the astonished pair. With him rode Sheriff Bolton.

Lefty Williams yelled angrily,

"He got your stock back, the youngster did, you big bag of wind."

Shader cackled nastily. "Still wranglin' among yourselves, huh? If it hadn't been for the shootin', we'd—"

He saw the man on the ground and broke off. "There's one who's escaped the rope," he finished.

Buck Garon had dropped the Colt to his feet and raised his hands slowly at Shader's command. The sheriff appeared now—a lynx-eyed man with an enormous mustache and mackinaw jacket reefered up against his ears. He stepped down from his horse, the muzzle of his gun not wavering an inch from the pair beside the oak.

Shader's narrowed eyes were on the Colt at Buck's feet.

"Hold 'er there, Sheriff!" he ordered. "He's full of tricks, that lobo whelp is!"

He sprang from saddle and advanced. He kicked the Colt away cautiously before stooping and picking it up.

"Herd yourself over by the fire," gruffly said the Sheriff. "Come on, now, move! I'm lettin' you know, young one, that Macey Cline was kin of mine!"

This announcement was as mystifying to Buck Garon as the cyclone of events which had preceded it. He did not know the name of the man he had been compelled to shoot in the Dry Lake store. He had not known, until a few seconds before, that he had stumbled onto a rustled Broken Arrow herd. He had uttered no word, because out of the scattered confusion of his thoughts he was trying to frame some convincing declaration of innocence. Of complicity in the rustling, at least.

Sam Shader was coming toward the fire, now. Buck Garon drew a deep breath. The tangled mess of circumstances needed clear, forceful explaining. He was filled with a new anger that the mission he had struggled so long to accomplish had been balked just short of accomplishment.

But speech froze on his lips with one look at Shader's face. All the blustery triumph had gone from it. Every bulge in the man, from his brutal jaw to his blob of a stomach, seemed to have shrunk. He was staring at the Colt he had picked up. He scrooched down by the fire, examining it closely. He read the butt plate. His hands were unsteady. He spun suddenly around.

"Where at did you get this gun?" he demanded wildly.

BUCK GARON decided it was time for him to talk.

"It was my father's gun," he said with deadly emphasis. "That's his name on it. I'm out to kill the man that murdered him, and that accounts for all this that's happened."

Shader's yellow-brown eyes flicked to the sheriff.

"He lies faster than a horse can trot!" he chattered. "What talk he'll invent to confuse a jury, the Lord only knows! I say, string 'em up, the pair of 'em! Here an' now!"

"You know I can't commit myself to no such act of folly, Shader," the sheriff stated ponderously. "I'll promise you justice, sudden justice."

"I'm layin' down my own law!" yelled Shader, all at once beside himself with some strange frenzy. "I always have! I planted bullet seed to make the Broken Arrow what she is! I'll plant some more, now!"

The hammer of the Colt snicked under his thumb.

Lefty Williams, listening to it all intently, had kept his hands raised level with his ears. His one good hand now gripped the brim of his hat. As Shader swung the Colt toward Buck Garon's heart, the old man ripped out:

"You're *harvestin'* bullets now, Shader!"

He let fly with the hat. It hit squarely in Sam Shader's face. The old puncher hurled himself after it. There was a dull explosion as the two of them col-

lided. The streak of flame was blurred against Williams' side. The two of them were down, threshing about in a fierce struggle for possession of the old gun.

The sheriff whooped profanely, but he dared not risk a shot that might hit Shader. He jabbed his gun in Buck Garon's back instead.

That poignant, dominating desire of his life drove all caution from Buck Garon now. No longer could he compel himself to stand helplessly by, a pawn in other men's puny affairs. He fell back against the sheriff, as though stumbling out of reach of the struggling pair.

In that brief instant of unbalance, he whirled and struck. Not with his fist, but with the heel of his hand. The sheriff's teeth clopped together as his head flew back. He pulled, but Buck struck his gun arm and the gun thundered its load past him.

Buck brought a heel down hard on the sheriff's right foot. He jolted the sheriff's jaw again, then grabbed the high collar of the mackinaw and hauled it over the lawman's head. He gave the gun arm a twist and got the gun, then butted the tottering sheriff with his shoulder. He fell flapping to the blankets where the lean rustler had crawled out to meet his finish.

It seemed one unbroken flow of motion, so swiftly had it been accomplished. And now Buck went at Shader and Williams. But the ruckus on the ground was over. Shader was on his back. The old puncher's left hand pinned him down with a stranglehold. His other hand fumbled at a powder-burned patch in his side. He looked at Buck Garon with a ghastly grimace of a grin.

"More'n a-a busted rib, this time," he murmured. He raised Shader's head, agony gripping him with the effort, then banged it down on the ground.

"Talk up, you snake!" he quavered. "The boy, here, he's waitin' to hear."

Shader's jaws worked like the gills of a landed fish. He pawed at Williams' sleeve. Williams relented and eased his hold a little.

"Jim Wardell's son, he craves to know who murdered his dad," said Williams. "You know, Shader. You tell." The sheriff had unscrambled himself. He found the carbine Buck had flung toward the tumble of blankets. He whipped it to his shoulder.

"Stay put, all of you!" he bellowed. Buck Garon's blood seemed to freeze. New dismay gripped him.

"For the love of heaven, man, let's get to the finish of this!" he pleaded across his shoulder, as he dropped the weapon he had wrested from the sheriff.

"Just set and listen, Sheriff," said the old puncher, sinking a knee into Shader's middle. "I—I'll promise you, I've made my last getaway."

SHADER got his breath. He suddenly screamed:

"He was a nester, Wardell was! I needed that water! It was draw or die, fence and fight.!"

"Then you shot him? Yourself?"

Shader was fighting for air again. Williams gave him a savage shake. Shader blubbered:

"Sheriff, stop him! Shoot!"

The carbine was resting on the sheriff's upraised knees, the muzzle lowered toward the ground.

"Sa-aay!" Bolton cried. "This here is worth listenin' to! Let's hear the rest, Shader!"

"Hear the man? Talk up!" Williams was swaying a little from his perch on Shader's abdomen. A dark flow stained the fingers that clutched his side. "Did you kill Wardell?"

Shader strained up. Enough so he could see the intently listening sheriff.

He sagged back to the ground, closed his eyes, and nodded. Buck Garon surged forward. Lefty Williams, with a new grip on his waning strength, rapped out:

"No you don't! Keep your own hands clean, son!"

His right hand left his side. It reached under Shader, brought out the Colt that had thrice changed hands in as many minutes. His back was to the sheriff, who did not perceive his move in time.

The explosion jerked Shader's outstretched form, and Lefty Williams dropped the Colt with bloodstains on its pale grip. He braced himself up on his elbow. His voice was a feeble whisper as Buck Garon and Sheriff Bolton closed in on him.

"I—I didn't rustle this stock, Sheriff. The youngster, he never had a hand in it, either. And I don't consider that eradicatin' this polecat Shader is murder." He struggled for strength to talk on. "Anyhow," he went on, "I'll never pay the penalty."

Buck Garon steadied him.

"But the gun?" he asked.

"Yore maw, she gave it to me."

"Say," yawped the sheriff, "this is all Greek to me."

It was Greek to Buck Garon, too, until Lefty Williams fought back the agony inside of him and continued:

"I—I was the one who found her. That time in the big snow, years ago. Found you, too, I realize now, son. Before she died, she told me your name. Odd I didn't figger out before who you was. She told me, also, that a dirty landgrabber had gunned her man. Never said where."

The old puncher's life was ebbing fast. The glaze of death was in his eyes.

"I rode you on the saddle in front of me, son. Through that blizzard. Buck Garon—James Garon Wardell—little tag with that name wrote on it."

It ended with a catchy breath. Lefty Williams shuddered and died. Buck Garon laid him gently on the ground and stood up. Sheriff Bolton heaved a sigh and rose, too. He turned his back and gazed with a great show of concentration at the night sky.

"If you was to high-tail out of here about now, Garon," he said very gruffly, "you could be a long ways off by mornin'."

"There's still the affair at Dry Lake to answer for."

"Macey Cline always was too quick with his gun."

"That muleheaded doctor thought I held him up. I was after evidence that Williams had been there. A ten-spot he paid."

"Reckon that might be explained. If you were to help me haze these Broken Arrow calves back, we could sort of apologize for your impatience."

It would help to clear the name of Lefty Williams, too, if he went back, Buck Garon reflected.

"I aim to," he said simply.

The sheriff turned and extended his hand.

"That settles it," he boomed. "I'm plumb satisfied now, that you're on the level, young one!" And then he was seized by an idea that seemed to please him greatly:

"Now, with Shader gone, who owns the Broken Arrow water? Huh, I got a strong notion what the law'll say!"

Buck Garon, as he went out to catch up his blue roan, was aware of an overwhelming gratitude to Lefty Williams. A gratitude that already had driven all hate for Shader from his heart.

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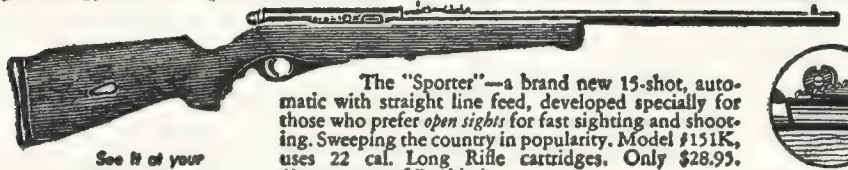

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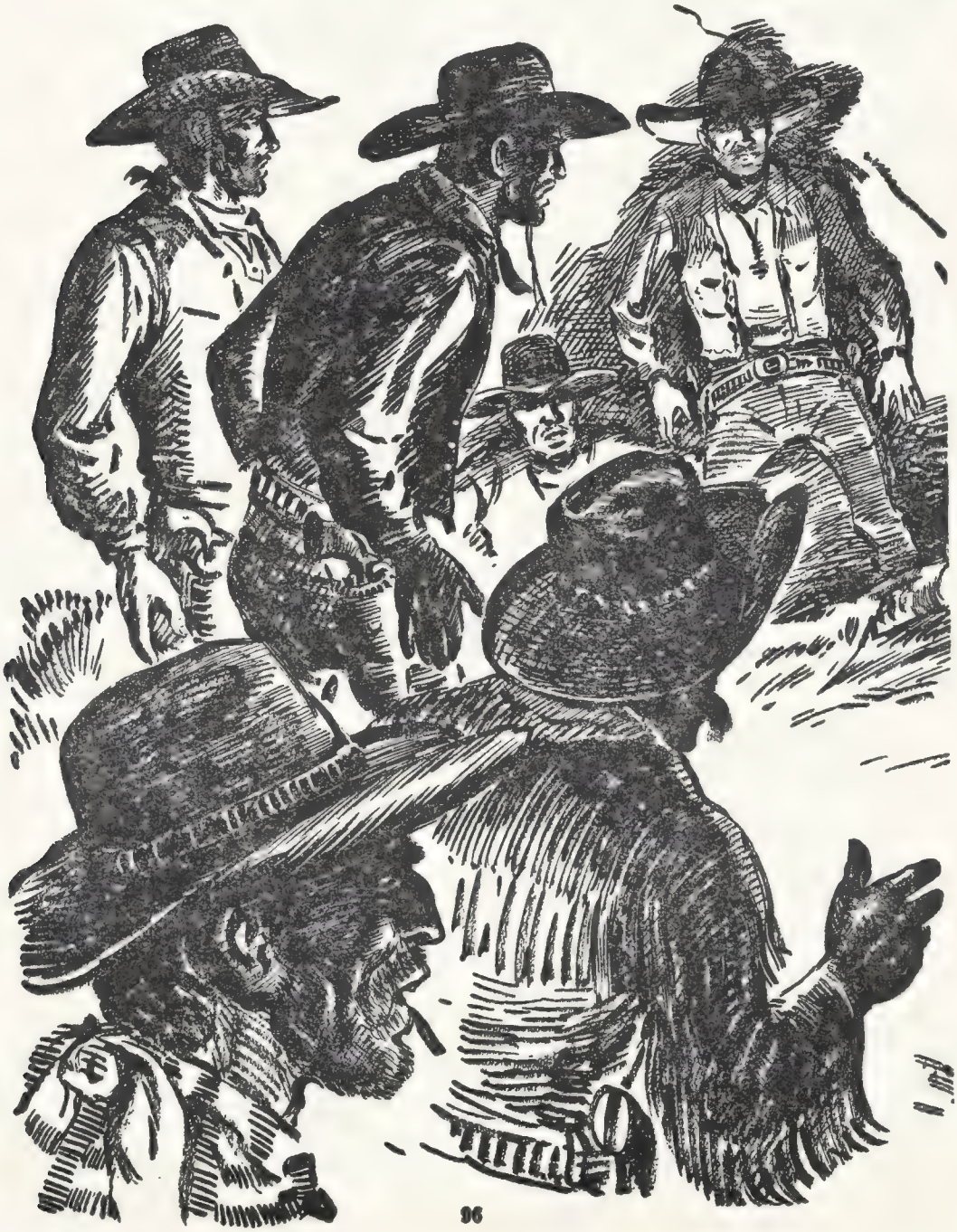

a novelet of the Frontier

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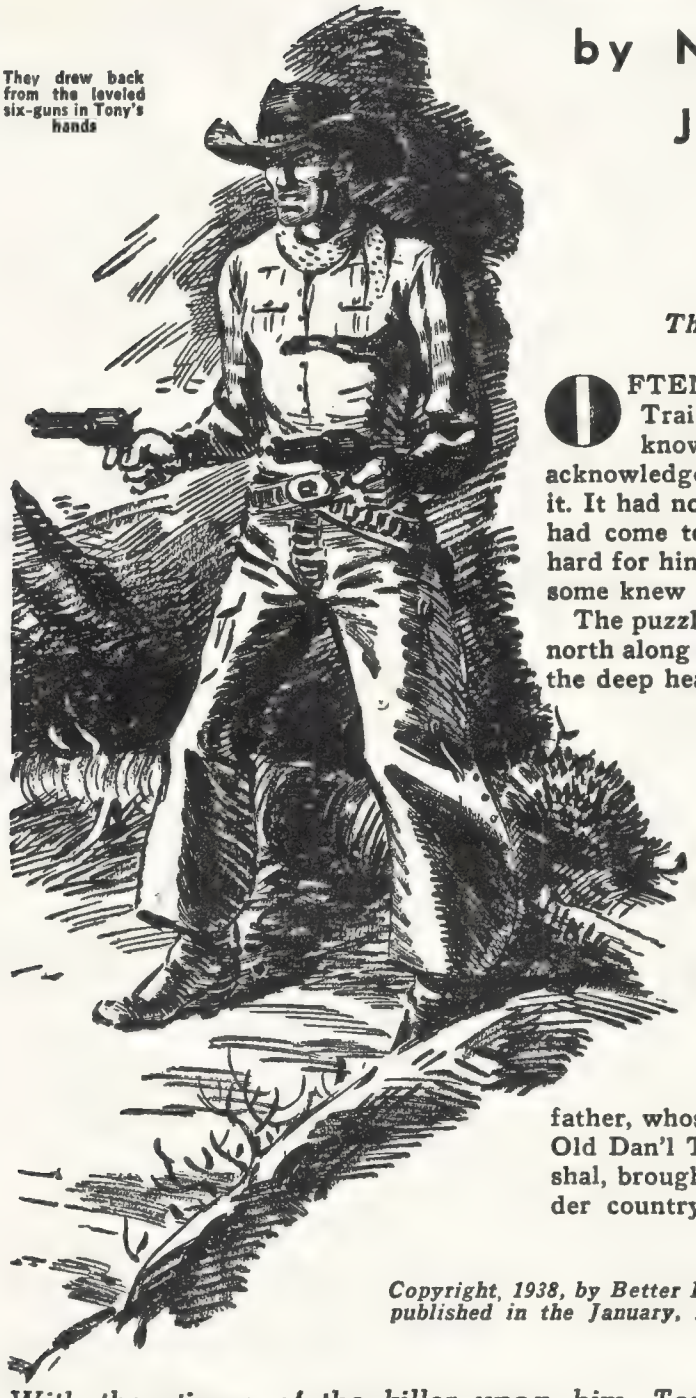

They drew back from the leveled six-guns in Tony's hands

CHAPTER I

The Traille Brothers

OFTEN in his life, young Tony Traille knew, he must have known fear. But while he acknowledged it, he failed to remember it. It had not come to him as he knew it had come to other men. And so it was hard for him to understand the fear that some knew and walked with.

The puzzle had brought him long days north along the forgotten trails out from the deep heart of Durango. East he followed nameless streams and low sierras, at last to cross Arizona's border and pull up the dust-covered, wiry little palomino in front of the Crow's Feather barroom almost in the middle of Cherokee Flats' long main street.

They knew him in Cherokee Flats—the oldsters, that is. Some of the newcomers had never even heard of Tony Traille's father, whose name was almost a legend. Old Dan'l Traille who had first, as marshal, brought law to a wild strip of border country, and then later as sheriff,

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With the stigma of the killer upon him, Tony Traille comes home to square accounts and wipe clean the slate of the fighting Trailles!

had nailed it down there.

There were no lights in the squat little 'dobe structure that housed the sheriff's office when Tony Traille went past there. So the Crow's Feather found him.

He had two drinks, letting them course gratefully down his parched, alkali-dry throat, followed them with a tall glass of water. He looked around then, saw no one he knew. He went out, and as he went men nudged one another.

IN ONE corner grizzled, hard-eyed Tucker Baine, owner of the Crow's Feather, director in the bank, president of the loan association and master of the rich 7-Bar-7 spread outside town, shifted a fat cigar from one corner of his thin-lipped mouth to the other.

"Wasn't that one of the Trallies?" he asked in a low tone.

His companion, across from him at the table, grinned and made a grunting sound.

"Yeah. That's the sheriff's brother—the bad 'un. Used to play here with you before he left, remember? Was you thinkin'—"

Baine made a start to his feet, then relaxed. His eyes had heavy lids, and now they lowered as his cigar shifted again.

"Better see where he goes, Pete. Find out all you can about why he's turned up again here. I crave to know."

Baine spoke in a soft voice, almost a drawl; yet it might have been a barked staccato command for the reaction it brought. Pete Greer shot to his feet. Long and loose-limbed, rangy, sandy-haired, with blue and somewhat shy eyes placed too close together on either side of a long and inquiring nose, he nodded and eased out of the house.

To the stable boy in the rear of the Crow's Feather Tony Traille flipped two shiny silver pieces.

"I'm riding soon again, muchacho—see there's a good job," he said.

Then stiffly, the spurs dragging on his high-heeled boots, he made his way down the board sidewalk of the main street. It was Saturday, and the stores were all lighted up. Hungrily, while he walked, his eyes devoured the familiar and yet somehow changed scene.

In some ways Cherokee Flats had improved. Outwardly there was no sign of the lawlessness the news of which had brought him restlessly north out of Mexico. With bitterness in his heart he had returned to this town, grimly purposeful. Here, where his brother was sheriff and his father had left behind so glorious a record, he was coming back as a pariah.

The three years that had intervened had marked him. He had left Cherokee Flats when he was just turning nineteen—tall, hard-riding, carefree and reckless nineteen. In those three years his father had died and his brother David had been voted into the sheriff's office. There had been scarcely a dissenting ballot. It spoke volumes for Old Dan'l's popularity, that election.

But things had changed shortly after it. It was as though the Flats and that long strip of untamed territory known as the Cherokee Sands country, along the Mexican line, had awakened slowly and lazily at length after an unnatural sleep. That mighty marshal and lawkeeper, Dan Traille, was gone. In his place stood a young man, raw and untried, with family responsibilities to curb his daring and with only a father's name as yet to lend weight to his rulings.

The Cherokee Sands had become a harbor for drifting pairs and trios loose from the Wild Bunch. The Crow's Feather was seeing more than once the faces that its patrons had observed mostly heretofore on reward posters at the depot or the county office. No one tried to halt them as they rode through. No one challenged their revels. There had been murder done, wet cattle had seeped into the country, more branded beef had been driven recklessly out, leaving a damp trail down to the river's shallow bank and leaving cloven hoofprints across on the farther side. But the new sheriff stirred not.

A lawless crew ruled the Flats. Guns had tamed it. Fear held it.

Lights burned low and yet intimately welcome from within as Tony Traille halted, hand resting lightly against the thick bole of a leaning cottonwood outside the square white house where his brother lived. Something rose and lumped in his throat.

A figure passed in front of a window. His heart gave trip-hammer beats. It was crazy! Yet he knew that deep down inside him had been a belief that he would one day return from his restless trailing and ask Polly Norden to become his wife.

Well, it was too late now. When he had got the news of her marriage to his brother he had been down in Durango; he had gone on a spree that had not ended for a week. In that week he had killed a man, and only the presence of a good many witnesses to the fact of self-defense had set him free.

Nevertheless, the episode had set a mark on him; he rode now as a man branded "bad." Men avoided him mostly. Others, the wrong kind, cultivated him. He had not grown to be proud of his trailmates in the restless months that followed. And the news of those months must have sifted up here before him. That kind of news, he knew of bitter experience, flies on wings.

BUT all that was one side of the picture, a vision he resolutely put from him. The other side was that his brother was sheriff, and law in the Cherokee Sands strip was no law. Men sneered openly at courts and justice in that strip of forgotten world. The Cherokee Sands were again known as "safe" country for the owlhooters.

And here, somewhere, must be a hidden place from which the continuous border traffic in stolen cattle was carried on. Tony Traille had heard of that place, and he thought he might be able to lead the way to it.

David Traille was not as tall as his brother, not as bold-looking or carelessly contemptuous of demeanor. In David's face were the old Traille signs: the eyes, like his brother's, were gray. The mouth was wide and straight. But the eyes lacked the direct challenge that was in Tony's eyes, and the mouth had a less resolute set.

David faced the newcomer in the familiarly cheerful old library of the strongly-built old stone and 'dobe house, his chin out and eyes hostile and unfriendly.

"You had no business to come back," he said.

Slowly, firelight from the big, arched fireplace etching his lean and hawklike features, Tony Traille shook his head.

"You're wrong there, Dave," he said quietly. "I had every right to come back. I want to ask questions."

David made no move to offer a chair, or hospitality.

"That all? Well, I can answer 'em fast enough. I sold out the ranch when Dad died; this present job I got elected into was getting too big to allow another interest. Your share of the sale price is in the bank in your name, at Mesa."

David continued, his lips quirking, "I judged it'd be all right for you to go to Mesa any time. There's no one wants you there—yet."

Tony only accepted that with a grim nod of acknowledgement. "The money can rest awhile. It wasn't one of the things I came to see you about. How's Polly?"

His brother's face clouded. "What about Polly?"

"Is she happy?"

"Certainly! Did you think—"

David broke off. A quick rustle of skirts, a low voice and Polly Traille was in the room.

The friendly fire-gleam caught at coils twisting through the glory of her corn-silk-yellow hair, turning it to burnished gold. Her blue eyes were wide with quick happiness. Her lips parted, red and sweet, as she recognized Tony and came quickly across the room.

"Tony!" she cried. "I thought I heard the voice and yet I thought, too, you weren't—"

Tony Traille took both her hands in his. Held them, while across the firelight his brother watched out of sullen eyes.

Inside him Tony was fighting to keep the quiet sense of gladness from his bearing, striving to hold back from his face the knowledge of what her presence meant to him.

Worth fighting for, this Polly Traille! Worth more than that. Worth dying or living for, he thought reverently.

"Just stopping for minutes, Polly," he found himself telling her. "Trailing through—got a little bunch of stuff south of the line. While I was here I wanted to let Dave know I was still all in one piece."

"And let me know, too, I hope!" It was as if Polly sensed a strain in the atmosphere, a tautness that her impetuous entrance had heightened. She turned quickly to David.

In that moment she half glimpsed the look on David's dark face. She brought up, then went on to say quickly:

"Is it true, Dave? He's not staying?"

"Says he's got business," David returned quietly. "I reckon maybe he's right, honey. He's got to—"

"Got to go on through," Tony broke in coolly. "But that don't mean I won't be back, Polly. Business, like Dave says. Maybe I'll be moving my headquarters up north here right soon. That—that's part of it."

Polly had always been quick to sense things. She had been aware of this strain even as she entered the room. Now she gave his hand a quick squeeze, turning away. She spoke over her shoulder.

"When you've finished the business, Tony—I'll be out in the patio. Stop and tell me good-by, won't you?"

He promised, even though he saw the ugly light that lit up David's eyes at the words. Then he was once again alone with his brother.

DAVID'S stare was unpleasant and bitter.

"Have we finished now?" he asked.

"Not yet! I came to find out why you haven't gone out after the—well, I know the name, so you must've heard it—they call it the 'Trading Post,' where the rustling sons that've taken over your territory meet and swap their wet beef for gold minted across the line!"

Tony's voice was low. While he had spoken, his brother had been listening with a flame growing in the back of his eyes. Now David said between his teeth:

"The Trading Post! Yes, and I'll bet you could tell me where it is, couldn't you, Tony? You and your pals—"

"I couldn't tell you exactly where it is," Tony Traille cut in evenly. "Not yet, I couldn't. But I could find out. I've got a good idea of its location right this minute and I intend to improve that idea. And if I do locate it, Dave, this is what I want to know—are you afraid to go there?"

His look bored hard as a jeweled drill. About to retort heatedly, David drew back. His eyes went past his brother, wavered toward the wide patio entrance. But when he spoke it was to say fiercely:

"I'm not afraid of anything, Tony Traille! And I don't try to locate the Trading Post because I—I know it's

worth a man's life to get in there and out. I don't know who I can draw for a posse, supposing I do locate that place and want to go in. I don't know who I can trust in this whole strip of country." Suddenly his face contorted. "Oh, I know! You're here looking at me with eyes that say you think I've turned yellow since—since—"

When he stopped, Tony spoke quietly. "Yet even I know that you've got a lot more to live for now, Dave. It's not that I'm thinking of. It's—"

"What?" Defiantly, at last, David spoke on the defensive.

"It's that our old dad wouldn't of stopped to do a hell of a lot of thinking

about a thing like that, would he, Dave? He never was much of a hand at thinking, old Dan'l. Thank God for that! Me, I—I want you to think less, Dave. If you locate that Trading Post and the men running it—or if I locate it for you—I want you to go there. Go there with gun law!"

He turned away. In the patio entrance he halted momentarily. David was staring at him, trembling, his fists knotted. In his eyes was a yellow flame. Through tightly clenched teeth he said:

"Trading Post or anything else, Tony—this is my warning to you to get out of this part of the country. There was a shooting at Malpais a couple years back that's still on the books. I could run you in for it right now; the evidence would be along, I don't doubt. Get it?"

Tony's gaze was level, blank.

"So that's been held up, too," he said enigmatically. Then, with a shrug: "I'm going, Dave, in my own time."

"You're going now!"

"After you've ridden with me into the Trading Post, Dave. You've got to go there, feller." Tony's voice was still quiet, restrained, almost sad.

"So—" David was trembling with suppressed emotion—"so that maybe the next time you ride into this patch of country, you'll find Polly a widow?"

The knotted muscles corded and twisted in Tony's big frame. In his gray eyes the killer light shone amber for the space of flickering seconds. Before the suddenly twisted mask of his dark features David took a pace backward and paled.

But as he stepped out, Tony Traille's voice was under control again, and he said:

"I reckon we'd better take that one up some other time. But for right now the answer to your question is—so that the next time I ride into here I won't have to feel my ears burning with the way men laugh when they mention Sheriff Traille!"

And his spurs clinked softly as he went out.

CHAPTER II

Baine's Proposition

MOONLIGHT was shining down across the patio. Leaning slightly against the old Spanish well there, half hidden under the outspreading fronds of a low cottonwood, Polly Traille was waiting. Her lovely face was a pale poem against the fragrant dusk; the moonlight, seeping through a tracery of cool greenery overhead, found nesting places in the coils of her hair.

She waited for him to speak, but Tony Traille found words hard. At last, he broke his difficult silence.

"I know why you wanted to see me, Polly," he said. "Don't be afraid."

Her look flashed up to him, startled. "You—know?"

"Yeah." His voice fell. "But he's a Traille, Polly. And—and he'll remember it when the time comes, I think."

She hesitated a long time. Then, at last, she summoned her courage.

"You never were—were bad, were you, Tony? The way they mean bad? The way some of them want to believe?"

He gave her a grim smile. "Ask Dave! He seems to think so. And a lot of the folks in town, too. But I've never done anything I'm really ashamed of, Polly. If that's what you're meaning,"

She smiled. "I think that's what I meant. Natalie asked me. She often brings up your name—"

"Natalie?" He frowned.

"My kid sister. Remember? She used to follow you around like—like a hero-worshipper. She's grown up now, Tony, and has become the new schoolmarm at the Flats. And she's pretty. So pretty that I often envy her." Polly was watching him.

He remembered Natalie now. A gangling little kid he used to lashion crazy

dolls for. He'd cut them out of beechwood or mold them out of the soft grayish clay of the creek bank. Then she'd take them home and reappear with them in dresses the following day, after having named them. Sweet child!

"Is she like you, Polly?" he found himself asking.

"Like me, only a little younger and lots prettier." Polly suddenly and impetuously dropped a hand on the leathered cuff of Tony's wrist. Her voice changed, dropped to a whisper. "Dave—he told you—gave you to understand that he doesn't know the men behind the lawlessness here, didn't he?"

"I got that impression. But I don't believe it."

"He doesn't actually know, Tony. But we all suspect. There must be someone big behind it all, Tony, someone we all know—who is safely entrenched here. And you can guess who that would be."

"Tucker Baine!"

"Baine and his Crow's Feather gang ran their own man for sheriff, you know. The man lost—some complete outsider they'd imported for the job. Dave nosed him out in spite of Baine. Baine, I think, saw his hold on this piece of country going with that election. So he's hitting back now. That's why this new reign of lawlessness. Baine isn't a man who'll back down after a challenge."

Tony Traille grinned ruefully, and rubbed his chin.

"If I recall rightly it was Baine and his gang they said I was playing in with, before I left here," he said. "The bad crowd. Well, I suppose I was. But they wasn't growed up into bad, then. Only wild."

She drew back, her eyes on his face. "You're wise, Tony, wise. You'll know if they've gone bad now. I'm glad we had the chance to talk."

He took her hand. "So am I. Cheer up, Polly. I got the equivalent of orders to leave town from my brother. But I think I'm sticking here till I've seen some of the sights!"

She watched him stalk away into the shadows where the moonlight failed to penetrate. Then she turned back into the house.

At the Crow's Feather, Tony Traille went up to the bar and ordered. He was curving his big hand around the shallow glass when someone touched him on the elbow. He turned. A lean man with sparse sandy hair stood there.

"Ain't you one of the Trailles?" Pete Greer asked.

"Why ask?" Tony's eyes hardened.

"No offense, pardner!" Greer said hastily. "No offense! Only if you're Tony Traille, then you know—you're a friend of Don Raimundo Cerra, across the line!"

"I know Cerra. Why?"

Greer shrugged his narrow shoulders. "Not my business. Only the boss asked me to check. Know Mister Baine?"

Tony's eyes took on blankness. "I saw him once or twice, before I left this part of the world."

Baine himself ranged up on the other side of the tall newcomer.

"I heard that last, Traille," he drawled. "Yes, we met. Sat in on a few games together, a couple years ago, didn't we? Thought it was you when you come in here while ago. Drink?"

"I am," Tony nodded, indicating his glass.

"Have another," said Baine, motioning to the bartender, who came back with a bottle. He left the bottle there. Baine poured. Greer, at his elbow, looked thirsty.

As Baine raised his glass he said, his hard eyes unflickering:

"Health, amigo! I thought I was right. So I guess we can call it that we know each other, eh?" But the way Baine spoke meant: "You know me!"

TONY nodded. "You'd just come into this part of the country, started up this cantina here and bought some kind of a spread before I got out. But we played cards together. You wasn't such a big name then, Baine." Tony downed his drink. "No. Two years can make a

lot of changes, I reckon."

"Staying, now you're here?" Baine's voice was a little less cordial.

A flame appeared at the back of Tony's eyes, died quickly.

"I just got word to move on," he said, "back south where I come from. My brother made the suggestion."

In the dust-covered bar mirror opposite him he caught the quick look that passed between Baine and his henchman. Then, suddenly he knew. That visit to his brother had been spied on! Someone had been lurking near the patio windows while they talked. Baine knew of that meeting, in all its essentials. Moreover, that meant there were forces which had a keen interest in the knowledge. On the other hand it was a certainty that the few words that had passed between Polly Traille and himself had not been overheard; they had been standing well out in the open and their voices had been pitched low. To have overheard them an eavesdropper would have been exposed to their view.

Baine said softly, "I know it ain't exactly polite, Traille, but you mentioned you just got word to move on. You didn't say, if I recollect, that you intended to go." He left the unasked question there.

Tony turned a little to face him, aware that Greer was at his back, but scorning the segundo in favor of the power behind Cherokee Flats.

"No, I didn't say I was going," he drawled soberly. Then he flashed a quick, open smile. "But come to think of it, it might be a lot healthier, at that. I heard Colonel Hark Wolverton has been on the prod lately, raving some. The colonel used to be a power hereabouts; still is, I guess. And I know how his Cross W has been taking it from rustlers in a grand style. He's on the warpath. Old Indian fighter, too, hot-tempered and full of beans."

"Wolverton's only one man, even if he is on the prod," Baine asserted softly.

"Yeah, he's one. Then I heard tell he's been importing gunfighters, intending to bring the law back into these parts. Big pay, but none of it for a man like me! Well, Baine, if you were in my shoes, and with my reputation—wouldn't you take that invitation of your brother's kindly? To get out, I mean? I don't want to cross Wolverton and his pack, even though I am handy with guns."

"You wouldn't have any worries with Wolverton if you was on my payroll, Traille," the owner of the Crow's Feather said softly.

Tony met the steely eyes. "Does that mean you're suggesting I get on your payroll? And that you're bucking Colonel Wolverton?"

Baine spread his hands flat on the edge of the bar. "I mean I want someone working for me who's in with Raimundo Cerra, or at least knows him. I want men who can use guns—like I hear you can. I'm making you a proposition, Traille—a good one with good pay."

"What's the proposition, Baine?" Tony asked softly.

"You'll be acting as segundo, trail-herding a bunch of stuff I got tied up and waiting for delivery on the hoof to Raimundo Cerra. I'm paying for two good guns that don't seem to have any other employer in these parts. Cerra doubles calf prices and the returns are big. I've held this bunch up because I got wind of something and I want to make sure there's gonna be no double-cross." The eyes that were fixed on Tony's were bleak and hard. "How does it sound?"

"I don't think so," Tony said softly.

BAINE'S breath came inward. His glass set down hard on the bar top. He spoke next with the menace of hard steel under his low, purring voice.

"So! Well, I still want you, Traille. I think you're the man I can trust with Don Raimundo. And I don't go around trusting men casual-like; usually I know why I can trust 'em. I got a reason besides big pay, a reason why I'm sure I can trust you. A reason that if your brother could be sure of it, he'd offer a reward for. The matter of a little kill-

ing down in Malpais!"

Tony stiffened. His breath was coming with difficulty. He jerked around with sudden inspiration. Now he knew where he had seen the man Pete Greer before! Greer shrank away a little at the look in his eyes.

Sure! A poker game and afterward a quarrel and a kill! And Tony had ridden hard out of Malpais, the law at his heels, his brain still reeling with liquor fumes from the night just ended. He could remember that voice in the dark now, that voice coming so soon after the sound of the shots that had startled his confused and whiskey-fuddled brain. It had been Greer's voice!

"They're comin' for you, man—ride!" Greer had roused him to cry hoarsely.

Then, still half asleep, still more than half stupefied with the liquor he had drunk during the game, Tony Traille had obeyed.

He had dusted it out of Malpais and across the Border that was so close, never to return until now. He had hoped that possibly the man had not died after those nightmare shots. That he had got out of town and away before his name was known, anyway. But now his cold eyes bored into Greer's.

"Maybe I remember," he said in a whisper. "My brother must of heard of that. It's what he must of been meaning tonight."

As he spoke in that tight voice, he was looking at Greer. Greer blinked, turned away, then shrugged with an effort as he spoke.

"Don't blame me too much, Traille. I don't know what the sheriff knows. But me—well, maybe I did talk—but only to the boss, when he asked me what I could tell him. And what harm's it done? You're with friends. We all know how to keep a shut mouth—"

"Except you, apparently!" Tony gritted.

Greer's thin cheeks flushed a dull red. But he made no retort. On Tony's other side Baine was saying:

"Better think again, Traille. The money's still good. Just a plain business proposition and it don't seem to me you can afford to be too choosy. If your brother's riding you, we can hide you right here in town. Say you rode out—"

A pause. Then:

"I reckon it'll be yes, eh, now you've thought twice? Bueno! Mike, we're having another little snort before we go out!"

As Tony accepted the bottle his gray eyes held a hard blankness. Yet he poured with unshaking hand.

"You might be right at that," he said slowly. "Guess you are. Guess it'll be —yes. Salud!"

CHAPTER III

Two-Man Posse

THE MAN in the miserable little adobe hut on the edge of town was a Comanche breed and was called Garcia. Garcia had a very slight admixture of Mexican blood and was resentful of his three-quarters Indian. He drank a lot. He had been drinking, Tony reflected, since sundown of this, the second day of his hiding in the low-squatting hovel at the outskirts of Cherokee Flats.

Garcia, exceptionally burly for a breed —a heaviness that failed to conceal his flabbiness, however—had been fumbling all during the day with his pack of greasy cards, interspersing his attempts at mastery of the white man's game frequently with a swig from the brown bottle of mescal. The close room by night was reeking with the odor of the stuff.

It was to this place that Baine had taken the man he regarded as a hard-bitten recruit. It had needed no further proof on Tony Traille's part of his split with his brother.

Before nine o'clock of the morning following his interview with Baine, there had been pressing inquiries made at the Crow's Feather stables and at the town's single hotel. It was assumed that the prodigal had vanished.

And now, tonight, Cerra was due to cross the river with a few of his men, was to meet Baine and his crew near the place known as the Trading Post. Tony had ridden there with Baine once; he knew it at last, even though he told himself he could have found it eventually without direction.

The cows, proceeds of rustling activities for the past six weeks, were to be delivered and payment made. Cerra was not outside the pale of the law, either on this or the other side of the border; he was engaged in traffic with shady characters merely because he knew he could get cheaper beef that way. To his mind he was simply disregarding laws too cumbersome to warrant respect; he was not breaking them.

If Cerra received cattle at night from a man he knew and paid low prices for them, but prices in good hard gold as part of the bargain for his lack of curiosity and his own partial culpability, that was an affair between himself and his conscience—besides being a good transaction. Certainly he was a respected—even though feared—man in his own territory, and in his sight he was an honest man.

BUT the men he dealt with were thorough rascals and Cerra was fully aware of it. Being unscrupulous and treacherous themselves, they made no pretense of having trust in others.

Tony Traille, outcast, would be a good man to have along in the coming contact with Cerra. That was Baine's reasoning. Though Cerra and Tony Traille might be friends, after that fashion, there would be little chance of that possible doublecross with Tony at the front.

Tony was aware of all this reasoning. He knew that, although he had been ostensibly taken here for a shelter that was free from the law's pursuit, he was actually being held in confinement until Baine's plans came to a head and Baine had need for him. He didn't wonder about what was to follow that.

He looked at the cracked dial of the ancient clock over the low stove. The hands had passed eleven some minutes ago. Before midnight Baine or one of his henchmen would be here for him.

He looked at the crossed belts of his guns hanging on the wall a good distance back of the breed. Watched narrow-eyed as Garcia swigged another drink, placed a greasy card, and cursed.

Tony, glancing away from the clock, gave a derisive laugh. When Garcia looked up at that he heard:

"You can't learn to play that game, Garcia. You never will stand a chance —with *aguardiente!*"

Garcia glared across at him. He drank again and his eyes showed bloodshot in the candle flare.

Tony eased lazily to his feet. Garcia's dirty hand moved toward the gun flat on the table alongside him; his eyes raised balefully. He glanced at the clock.

"Sit down! They come for you—*uno momentito.*"

Tony shrugged. "But you're playing a black five on a red seven! Can you add, *jibaro*? Or do you even cheat yoreself?"

He laughed and Garcia swore. He looked at the cards again, looked where Tony's outstretched finger pointed.

Tony moved. The candle fell over to sputter in its own hot grease as he flung himself like a catapulted thing across the room. The table spilled over. Garcia went back with it, and the gun clattered yards away.

The unsavory room became plunged at once into black, palpable dark. Tony reached for the breed's throat, found greasy hands clawing at him furiously. The thick body arched against him, hands and legs shuttling wildly. And as he fought over the foul-reeking floor, amid the dead, stale odors from vile liquor and the more rancid odor of personal uncleanliness, his mind was ham-

mering with the thought:

"Afraid! Afraid! Is David afraid? He can't be!"

Then his clawing fingers came down over the hard feel of the gun that had been spun away. He got a grip on it, taking two hard blows to the right side of his jaw as he maneuvered. At last he was able to bring it up a little and swing down with it upon the breed's head.

At the blow the tenacious hands at his throat loosened a trifle. Tony eased the gun, caught it more firmly in his hand, smashed down with it a second time. This time he heard the crack of it as the flat swiped true across the breed's temple. Garcia went suddenly limp.

Breathing hard, Tony drew back and regained his feet. It was dark inside the shack; nevertheless, he knew his way. He groped across the room until he found his guns and belt. Swiftly he harnessed them on.

HE WENT to the door, wiping absently at blood on his face as he moved. Outside all was serene; the air felt cool and gratefully sweet, scented with the dryness of the desert. A low moon was scudding in and out of earth-bound clouds; storm was in the air, but distant. Storm moving up out of Mexico, easily six hours or more off. But it would make Cerra impatient.

The palomino, he knew, was stabled in a low barn half hidden by the tangling growth in the rear of the shack. It was moments only before he felt the velvety muzzle nosing his palm. He found saddle and bridle and swiftly tightened a cinch snug over the thick blanket folded on the animal's back.

He kicked into his stirrups, headed out. The lights of town were ahead. He skirted them wide.

Only fifteen minutes after the beginning of the fight in the 'dobe shack he was striding across the stone flagging of the Traille patio, entering by that way his brother's house at the farther edge of town. Only seconds he stood there before he went on. Time was precious!

But Polly was nowhere in sight. Like a ghost he slipped along the side of the house, slid in through one of the open windows, brought up facing his brother across the room.

David, at the sound of his entrance, sprang up from a chair before a desk littered with papers, quick panic in his face. No weapon was anywhere near him. His jaws moved.

"Tony! You didn't go then! After all, you've come back to—"

He broke off as the younger brother reached his side. "I got guns here. Get yours! A rifle, too, if you can manage," Tony gritted. "There's cattle being transferred at the Trading Post at midnight, and we're riding to get our men! Move, now—pronto!"

"You're crazy, man!" gasped David. "The Trading Post? How'd you know all this?"

"I've found out enough; I can show you the Trading Post. Don't ask questions. Time's important!"

"But—how do you know?" David's look was suspicious.

"I've been on the payroll of Tucker Baine ever since I left here." Tony chuckled. "That's one way of putting it, at that. You helped—giving me my riding orders out of here. But it don't matter how I know, does it? It's what I know. And I'm dead sure the transfer of a lot of stolen beef is taking place tonight. That's enough for both of us. For the rest—you're coming with me to break it up, the whole party!"

"But a posse—"

Tony interrupted with a disgusted grunt. "You know there's no time for a posse, and not enough men in town you trust, anyhow. You admitted that to me yourself. Come on, this has got to be a two-man job—yours and mine!"

"I'm not coming and the devil with your guns! You're wanted right now on a suspected murder charge, Tony. If I was mad enough to believe what you're trying to tell me—but I'm not. How do I know this is no trap?"

Flame lit Tony's eyes.

"You don't!" he snapped. And his gun was suddenly in David's ribs. "You don't. But you're coming, Dave." His soft voice was a purr, low with menace. "It can't be any worse than what it will be if you don't come. Savvy? And if Polly's got to have a corpse for a husband, it might just as well be one she can be proud of!"

David breathed deep. His fierce, frightened eyes lowered under the icy glare of his brother's look. He swallowed hard.

"I'm coming," he said, and moved toward his gun-belt.

Tony, watching, stepped between. "Never mind! I'll give you that when we get outside, long before you'll need it. Get a rifle or two right now."

David bit his lip. He walked ahead of his brother and into the adjoining room. There he took down two rifles from the wall. From a drawer he dug out a fistful of ammunition, stuffed it in his pockets. At Tony's gesture he moved toward the patio windows. There he turned.

"Some day you're gonna pay for this, Tony," he said in a low voice. "I'll promise you that!"

Tony's reply was a frozen smile. "Seems like I paid in advance, doesn't it? Where's Polly tonight?"

"Upstairs. Went to bed early. Headache," David answered gruffly, and marched off toward the dark bulk of the stables.

Tony drew his own palomino close and waited while his brother saddled, turning a deaf ear to his low blasphemies. His eyes sought and found the balcony over the patio. They caught the flutter of something white there. Made out a pale oval that might have been a face. He wondered if there were tears upon it. For he knew—knew for a certainty when he caught sight of a slim white arm and a hand where a handkerchief fluttered as it was half raised to fall again—that Polly was aware of what was going forward.

But David did not look back. His dark eyes were hot in the moonlight. Tony, one foot in the stirrup, grinned up at him with his frozen grin and spoke.

"Let's go, *hermano!* We're riding for bigger stakes than a passel of rustled cows tonight!"

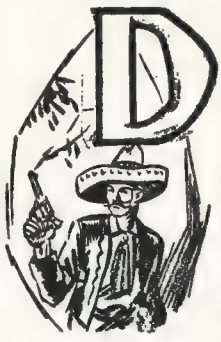
David failed to comment. They rode hard. Avoiding the main street, they circled toward the edge of town, then struck up into the dark hills that pressed so closely down.

There was no word. In profile David's head was a sharp succession of cold lines. Once or twice Tony Traille glanced sidewise at him, then away. Having started, David made no attempt to escape or turn back.

The mind of Tony Traille, that night, was centered on greater things than their present situation, or even to what that situation might be leading them.

CHAPTER IV

Trading Post Gunsmoke



DEATH and blazing guns! Yes, certainly those things lay at the end of this trail. Things that easily could be avoided by simply turning back now. Only bigger things than this menace lay ahead, too. A stark challenge waited for them at their destination, a challenge that had to be met.

And there was Polly, whose faith and trust must be considered. There rode, too, side by side with the brothers, like a spurring, dominating ghost, the spirit of the man who had sired them and had brought law into this country in the beginning.

At last, after more than half an hour in the gloom:

"Where we heading?" David asked.

"Trading Post," Tony answered, and no more.

There passed a long time in silence.

Only the friendly hills gave back the muffled hoofbeats of the two mounts pacing side by side. The terrain gradually climbed, and the ponies strained harder. Above them the sickle moon hung crookedly.

At last David pulled rein. Through the semi-dark his eyes were burning out of hollow sockets.

"Is all this really on the level, Tony?" His low whisper was hoarse.

Tony waved a hand vaguely; but rising up in front of them was a V-shaped notch carved out of the blue-purple of the night.

"Back of there's your Trading Post, Dave," he said. "And inside there tonight the transfer of Colonel Wolverton's beef is taking place. His beef, and the rest that's been held up there. We're breaking up the party."

"Two of us? How?"

"Riding. Come on."

Mutely, not speaking, David followed now. He made no demur when, in the very shadow of the gap that led through the notch, his brother drew up and motioned him to do likewise. His jaws had been locked for a long time. He watched, waited. They were both silent now. Tony handed him the cartridge belt with its revolver swinging from it, passed over one of the rifles. David accepted it all and buckled on his belt without comment.

A new rigidity had come into his pallid face, a new set to his chin. Though his eyes still held haunted lights he moved with some new stubborn, inward will motivating him.

They picketed their mounts carefully and moved on foot up the gap. There they both brought up for a moment. Moonlight washed down across the open. From the terrain below there could be no possible sign of this place; it was too wild, too awesomely rugged.

Southward, from the vantage afforded by height, the flat, open country unrolled as far as the eye could follow. Beyond it lay the Mexican border. But before Mexico there was the meandering thread of the river winding like a black tracery on a blue-washed drawing.

As Tony turned back he was in time to see a form materializing alongside David. David slid sidewise. A low voice out of shadows demanded:

"Que hay?"

As though by instinct David's gun flashed up and down. Hand on the grip of the gun in his right-hand holster, Tony stood looking on almost without interest as he saw the Mexican crumple under the impact of his brother's sideswipe and collapse with a grunt.

David swung white-faced from the prone figure. His eyes mirrored horror. Tony grinned a little.

"Good work!" he approved. "We don't want noise. We'll go on in."

He led the way. The inside of the Trading Post was a rockwalled and cavernous place. It seemed deserted of men at that moment. Here and there fires gleamed dully, as though no one had cared about putting them out. A number of hastily-built huts crowded out of the half-dark.

There was what appeared to be a wide main street, but it was crooked and without plan. At the farther end of it blackness prevailed. From beyond there came the unmistakable sounds of cattle moving restlessly and the occasional bawl of a calf.

Tony drew his brother aside.

"We got here in plenty of time, seems like," he said. "I don't suppose I have to tell you what's down yonder in the dark where the street ends, but they are Wolverton's cows. And maybe brushing against 'em are some other of the valley brands. This is the Trading Post."

BLAZING-EYED, David turned on him.

"Sure, we found it all right!" he exclaimed. "But only one who'd been playing in with this gang would know of it. Why didn't you—if you guessed where it was—let me dig up a posse and raid it?" His whole being was vibrant with suspicion and challenge.

"Why?" Tony repeated softly. "I'll tell you why, Dave. You said you couldn't trust anybody in town. You don't trust me, but we'll let that go. I made you come here because I wanted you to get the credit, or—"

"Or get killed!" finished Dave harshly. "All right, we're here. Show me—"

Tony abruptly caught his brother's arm, pulled him into the deeper shadows. Men were coming through the gap. A light sprang up from a small fire near the entrance.

"That'll be Cerra arriving," he said softly. "To pay up and drive his cows across the line. It's up to you now, Dave. I'm backing yore play. Maybe neither one of us will pull through this business."

"What do I—"

But they had no chance, just then, to take the initiative. A cry sounded, a thick curse. Out from the shadows near the small fire sprang the figure of the man David had dropped. The sentry! He was swearing wildly, hands clapped to his bleeding head, jerking out staccato oaths.

Baine's voice came, hard and incisively cold with command.

"It's them brothers! Scatter and get 'em, boys. Root 'em out!"

David found himself hurled out of the way of the first wild sweep of gunfire. He lay flattened on the smooth rock a little above and to the rear of the place where the fire was.

In seconds the bowl had become incarnate confusion. The issue was joined. Hot lead flayed the rock. David groaned, worked the lever of the rifle Tony had handed him.

"It's suicide!" he gritted. "But you always was a reckless devil."

Further talk was drowned in confusion and the sound of angry shots. Casting a side glance, Tony Traille smiled a little smile. David was cursing, recriminating, raging—but his jaw was set hard and his eyes were blazing as he fired at the rustlers. He was firing with cool judgment, spacing his shots. There was a mixture of many emotions in his behavior, but not fear. Not now, and Tony resumed his own firing happily.

They could hear the snarling voice of Tucker Baine:

"Those sidewinders can't get out of here—let 'em have it!"

Then another voice. Tony started. Here was death, after all, and even though he had learned to walk with it and jeer at it, he was very much alive. The voice was Raimundo Cerra's.

He touched his brother's arm and went sliding down the cliff face in the dark. Behind him David's rifle flashes lit up the blackness at intervals, stabbing venomously; behind him David's lusty curses flowed as he covered Tony's move.

A figure came creeping toward Tony, wriggling over the narrow way, gleaming teeth clamped on a knife blade. The eyes behind the glittering edge of steel gleamed catlike, savage.

A gun blasted close. Tony felt the sting of smoke in his eyes, blinding him momentarily; then there was a scramble, a leap—and the hot burn of a knife bit into his shoulder near the neck.

His own gun spoke twice as he rolled. The dark figure in front of him swayed, the knife clattered. Suddenly the man slid sickeningly to the side, and went crumpling off the path ledge.

Tony's eyes lighted. Now this way would be clear. For the moment David, covering from the rear, would be safe.

He moved on. At last he was over the blaze in the pit near the crater's mouth. He could distinguish the figures below him. He could make out their faces, and his eyes gleamed in the reflected light from the dancing flames.

He had a bead on Tucker Baine as the fellow stood up. The man's face was stained a devilish hue in the firelight. Baine turned to the squat, dark man a little out of range of the fire-glow.

"Cerra!" Tony breathed aloud.

Then Baine's snarling voice came.

"There's only two of 'em!" he told his men. "You're drawing fighting men's

pay. Go out and get 'em!"

Dark figures stirred. As they massed, Tony suddenly dropped lightly from his vantage point and was standing at the edge of the firelight glow.

They drew back in dismay before the way he stood there facing them, blood on his cheek, his lips writhing away from his white teeth like a wounded puma. They drew back from what they saw in the narrowed eyes above the leveled six-guns.

"You've played out all your rope, Baine," he said. "Cerra—keep back! You're out of this. It's me and two others! Tonight the Trailles are out to bring law—gun law for the lawless!"

THERE was a wild, hysterical cry. Tony's sudden appearance there had halted them all for a moment; perhaps there was the realization that he had foolishly placed himself at their mercy at last, that there was no need to hurry the end. Pete Greer cursed and charged, two guns in action and vomiting.

Cerra's cigarette end glowed yellow and strangely calm through the billowing gun smoke. His small black eyes were calm, too, looking mildly appreciative. Neither Cerra nor his men, crouching like waiting wolves in the shadows, moved. He could understand this fight and what lay behind it. He could appreciate it; and because of this he signaled his men to remain quiet.

Tony Traille felt his own guns jerk and tremble in his hands; he knew the heat of them. Across from him, etched in the fire-flame, Baine's face became dissolved in a mist. In another moment there was only the evil, malignant features of Pete Greer.

"He's got to—" Greer cried, starting forward.

The cry broke off suddenly, and choked. Two of Tony Traille's slugs caught him in the chest even as he began his charge. Baine, reappearing, scooping up a dead man's gun, rushed. Two of his men, cursing, swept in.

Guns thundered anew to wake the sleeping echoes of the Trading Post. Tony went down as something seemed to strike him a mighty blow high up on his left breast. He was conscious of a raging, incoherent voice snarling above him as he stumbled to earth with the twin .44s still clenched in his hands. He had a little, twisted smile on his face as he recognized a voice he knew. Dave had come all the way through. The roar of thundering .44s and he saw Baine's contorted face dissolving strangely in a smoke-wreath, this time to stay down.

Then Tony was up on one knee, staggering. He had Pete Greer by the throat, but his hands were bloody and they slipped treacherously. He could scarcely hear Pete's choked, terrified screams for mercy.

Almost he did not hear Cerra's quick, sharp command to his men:

"Aqui! Oiga, hombres, this is not our fight. *Vamosnos*—we ride!"

Things were going a little black for him. He could feel David's fumbling hands exploring him for his hurts. Pete Greer's gasping, rattling last breaths came to his ears as the rustler went cursing his way out of a world that had spawned him for evil and had done with him at last:

"Yes—it was me. Gawd, I tell you it was me! I did the shooting in Malpais. Help—"

POLLY was holding his hands. He was in a clean white bed in Polly's clean white house. Her eyes, wavering in front of him where he lay propped deep among soft pillows, were misty with a subdued glory.

"You made good your promise, didn't you Tony?" There was a tremulous catch in her low voice. "Dave's the hero of Cherokee Flats now. A gun sheriff! And you—"

He shrugged, or tried to; only the movement cost him a wince of pain.

"Dave always was a hero," he said. "Only he had to be showed how a hero works. There's a trick to it; he caught on fast. But did he hear Greer tell me

—confess to that—"

"Greer admitted he killed that man in Malpais, if that's what you're trying to ask," Polly whispered softly. She put a cool hand on his forehead. Then she got up with a smile. "Really, Tony, it isn't I who've been nursing you since you've been here. Though I don't think you've been very bad, from all I hear."

"You haven't? Then, who—"

"Natalie." Polly's nose crinkled in a way he remembered. "Dear Tony, do you really want to drive all those cows of yours up here from Mexico and settle down in this strip, after all? If you do—"

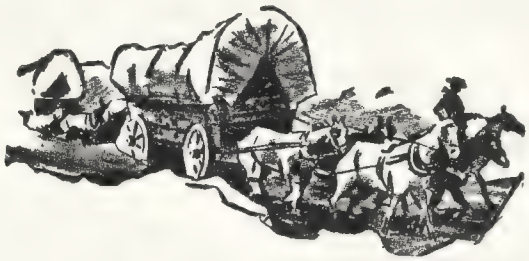
She was at the door.

Tony was frowning. "I do," he said. "And—and tell Natalie I wish she'd come in here to see me, now that I'm sane again."

Natalie! A sweet kid! Then he smiled to himself.

For Tony Traille, even as he sank back among his pillows once more and closed his eyes, was happy for many things. As drowsiness was fast overcoming him he murmured aloud:

"Sure, I was right. I had to be right. No Traille was ever born anything but—well, a Traille!"



FRONTIER ARMORED WAGONS

By Simpson M. Ritter

ARMORED cars made their advent in the East around 1900 but the West saw an earlier version of them in the 1860s and 1870s. As the West opened up banks were built and these often required hard money as well as bank notes and paper securities for their operation. Sending specie and currency by stage coach proved highly risky. There were bandits and Indians.

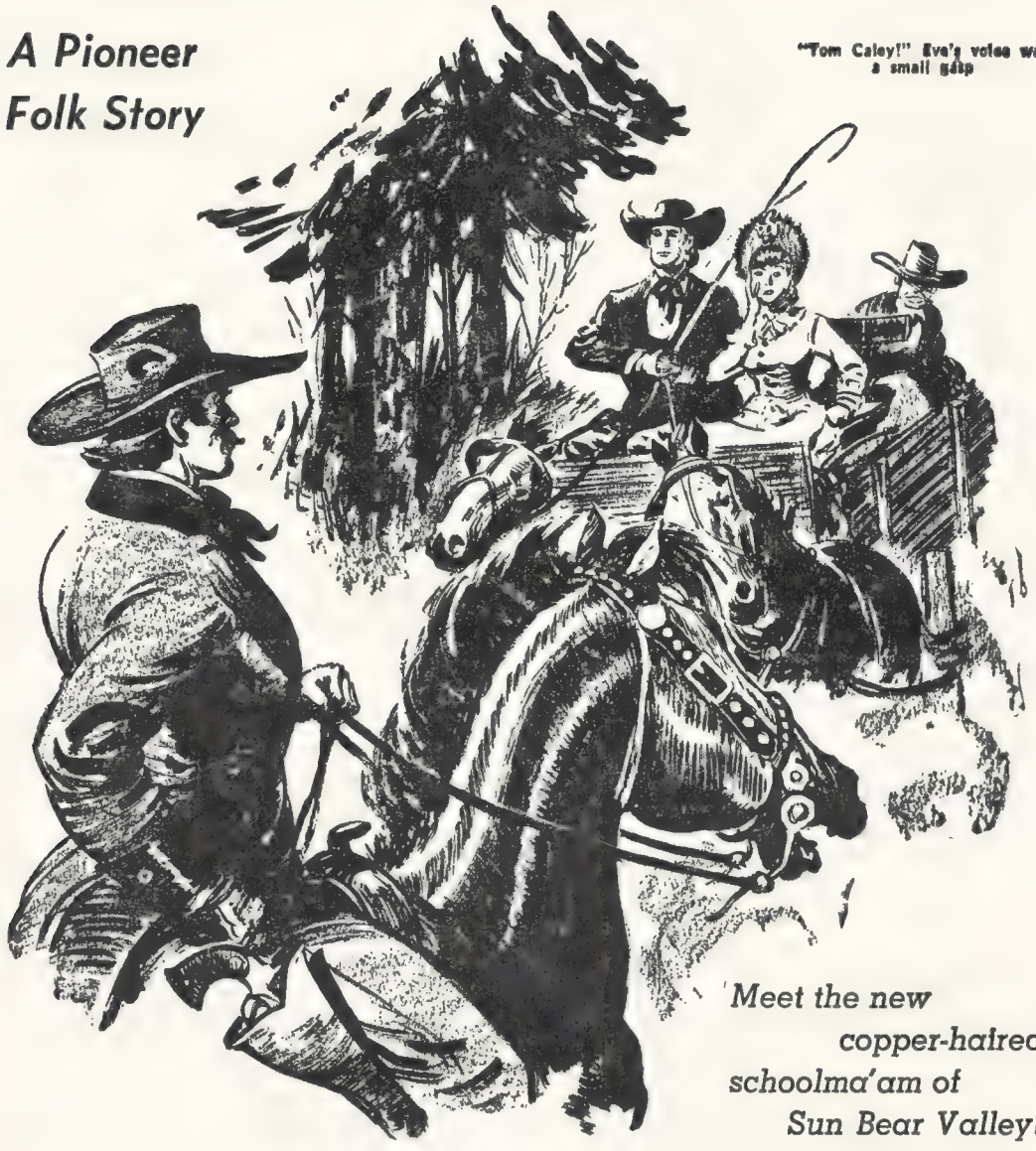
Two Civil War veterans, James Spor of Hartford, Connecticut, and Martin van Curver of Hamilton, New York, had served with one of the very few Union railroad guns. They devised a plan and proposed it to Eastern bankers. The Eastern bankers wrote West and told their colleagues that here was something new and better and urged them to use it.

On April 17, 1867 Spor and van Curver pulled out of New York city driving a box-like wagon drawn by four horses. The wooden framework of the closed box was lined with sheet metal of a thickness calculated to withstand any small arms bullet then manufactured. There were four suitably placed holes on each of the two sides of the wagon and two in the front and back thru which one might poke a shot-gun and aim it. In all the wagon was but nine and a half feet long, seven feet high and five feet wide. It looked mighty funny and no one knew what it was.

Within the wagon lay a quarter of a million dollars, most of it in gold and silver coins, consigned to banks at Amarillo, Texas and Santa Fe, New Mexico. It took eighty-seven days to make the trip and the delivery cost the bankers seven thousand dollars.

The Spor and Van Curver money wagon made but that one trip. They were too expensive and the railroads were spreading fast.

A Pioneer Folk Story



Meet the new copper-haired schoolma'am of Sun Bear Valley!

Cupid Packs a Gun

DAL BALDWIN and his lovely wife Mary, the first settlers of Sun Bear Valley, sat in the glory of a midsummer sunset watching a ten acre strip of flax blowing in the soft evening breeze.

It was Baldwin's first planting of flax. He had reason to be optimistic, for the seed would net him close to ten dollars a bushel.

By HAROLD F. CRUICKSHANK

But into Dal's optimism crept doubt, uncertainty. So much could happen between now and harvest time. A frontier settler could never be sure he would harvest his crop.

Mary's eyes glinted as she watched the crop undulating like a beautiful blue sea.

Suddenly she started as the splash of another color caught her eye beyond the flax field.

"Here comes Natalie Fryer, the school teacher, Dal," she said. "I wonder what she wants."

"Somethin' in her craw again," Dal said.

Miss Fryer had never been popular at Sun Bear. She had never been wholly satisfied at the little frontier schoolhouse.

More than once she had asked for time off, and Mary Baldwin, herself an ex-teacher, had taken over for a week or so.

MISS FRYER managed a smile for the Baldwins as she stepped up to the stoop. She came to the point of her visit at once, handing Dal a letter.

"My resignation, Mr. Baldwin. I've decided to go," she said. Then added, with an impatient toss of her head, "Read it."

Dal opened and quickly read the letter.

"Too many older pupils!" he exclaimed sharply, without looking up.

"That's partly it," the teacher answered.

"Well, that's as may be," Dal said slowly. "You see, we were without a teacher for so long some of our young uns grew up to nearin' manhood an' womanhood, but that don't mean they're not to have an education."

"N-no, of course not. But I've reached my decision," Miss Fryer said.

"Okay, then, ma'am," Dal said. "I can tell you right off, it will be accepted. I'll have a meetin' tonight, so's not to hold you up. Maybe young Mart Morrison could drive you to railhead."

Miss Fryer smiled her thanks, shook hands and turned away.

Mary Baldwin sighed as she watched the tall, angular woman swing along the creek trail.

Mary acknowledged that Natalie Fryer was partly right—there were too many grown-up pupils at the school. But there were also a few little ones, and in time, there would be others. The grown-up pupils of today would, before long, be marrying.

Mary turned to Dal, smiling.

"It isn't anything to worry about, Dal," she said. "School's out for another month, anyhow. Like me to write a letter to the county seat for you?"

"Uh—hold on, hon. I was just thinkin' about Marshal Frank Syme, of Cody, tellin' Doc about a teacher up there who might be persuaded to come—a Miz Bartel. Reckon I'll just take a pasear along to see Doc."

Dal rose and strode on along the trail by the creek to visit his closest friend and first neighbor, little Doc Carson.

Doc was haying, working late. Dal found him and big Deacon Forster, the Valley's parson, hard at work in a meadow.

Dal smiled as he watched the parson fork hay into big cocks. Never had the Sun Bear Valley folk made a better move than when they accepted Forster into their district. They had built him a church and a manse.

Dal strode up and Doc swung about, favoring a permanently bent left leg, a victim of arthritis. Doc was small, but a bundle of energy.

Dal and Mary Baldwin had often wondered just what they would have done here in the wilds had it not been for the coming of Doc and his big, bluff, kind-hearted wife Marta.

Doc's mouth parted in a wide grin to reveal an almost complete set of gold-capped teeth. Marta had said of this habit, "Little old coot sometimes grins when he's flamin' mad, just so he can show off all his gold!"

Dal quickly told his neighbors the object of his visit.

"Why, the dang old biddy!" Doc gasped. "Imagine a hawk-faced old critter like Miz Fryer hankerin' for the bright lights of the east." He turned and spat testily over his shoulder.

Deacon Forster flung back his head and roared with laughter.

"Doc," he said through his chuckles, "when St. Peter begins to tally up your record, he'll bust himself laughin' like I do."

Doc grinned and wiped his stained mouth. He looked sharply up at Dal now. "Means we got to pay her off and tote her up to the railhead, Dal," he said in his husky, gravelly-toned voice.

"That's right, Doc. We better go through the motions of a meetin' of the board, though."

Doc nodded and turned to the Deacon.

"Mind if I leave you alone a spell, Deacon?" he called out.

"Go ahead, boys, go ahead. I'll be fine," Forster boomed back. He was already back at work.

AT THE Carson house, Dal shook hands warmly with Marta who quickly brought refreshments—raspberry vinegar and lemon cookies.

As they sipped their cordial, Dal and Doc talked, but every now and then Doc cast sly glances at his wife, glances which were signals.

"You two up to somethin'?" Dal asked softly.

Doc gulped the last of his drink and wiped his mouth. "Well, yeah, Dal," he said. "It's like this—you know what a good man the Deacon is, but he's lonesome here at the manse."

Dal's smile broadened. "Seems like I begin to see a little naked guy by the name of Cupid hoverin' around, Doc," he said, laughing shortly.

"You're right, Dal. A fine man like the Deacon should get hisself a wife. We'd had hopes with Miz Fryer, but—that is, we had hopes before we saw her and got to know her a mite."

Marta made a face which set both Dal and Doc to laughing.

"I see," Dal said. "You got some ideas, then?"

"Sure enough, Dal. Here's the opportunity we been lookin' for. What better hook-up could we have than to bring in a likeable school ma'am, one that would make a fittin' wife for the Deacon?"

Dal's brows flicked up. It seemed like a perfect idea all right. Deacon Forster and his wife could combine the education of young and old of the Valley—the academic and the spiritual education.

"But what'd happen if young uns of their own came along?" Dale asked. "I ain't never seen it fail. Parsons' wives ain't again' having big families, you know."

Marta tittered. "That's somethin' you didn't calculate on, Doc," she said, nudging him in the ribs with an elbow.

Doc's brows knitted in a cloudy frown. His jaws now ground steadily on a fresh cud of eating tobacco. Now he looked sharply up from one to the other.

" 'Course I thought of that," he said. "But, in a—emergency, like the comin' of a young un, Mary could take over a spell. See?"

Marta turned to Dal, smiling broadly. "Deacon's ears must be afire right now," she said. "Here we've got him started raisin' a flock of kids and he ain't even met his wife yet."

"You have a teacher in mind, Doc? That Miz Bartel up to Cody, maybe?"

"That's right, Dal. Frank Syme recommended her. Claims every top hand along the Wood River and North Fork is chasin' her. She's that pretty, but also has good common sense."

"If she's that popular, Doc," Dal said slowly, "do you think she'd come down to the frontier here? Cody ain't big, but it's lively. There's life there. Miz Bartel can, every now and then, hear the cry of a locomotive whistle."

"She's twenty-five or so, Dal. Ought to be able to make up her own mind. Be-

sides, she might be glad to git away. Syme was tellin' me they's already been a shootin' over her."

Dal winced sharply. This shooting business didn't augur so well.

"Somebody must be in love with her a heap, huh?" he questioned slowly.

"Yeah. A big two-fisted ranny—handsome ramrod of a big Wood River cattle outfit. Tom Caley's his name," Doc said.

"He do the shootin'?"

"That's right, Dal. Kilt a guy in a dance brawl. They claim it was on account the other feller was tryin' to cut in on Eve Bartel."

"My, ain't Eve just the finest name for a wife for the Deacon!" Marta interrupted.

Dal laughed. "It would be perfect if'n the Deacon's name was Adam instead of Deacon," he said, laughing again. "Well, let's go see Eve Bartel, Doc. How about if Jim and I come up tomorrow, help you finish your hayin', then we can drive to Cody and see—just what we can see, huh?"

"Great! Fine, Dal." Doc got to his feet. He was starting for the door when Marta called him back.

"You filled your own lining with a cordial and cookies, Doc. How about takin' a mess along to the Deacon?"

"Why, sure now," Doc agreed.

Dal was still chuckling as he and Doc strode back to the meadow, where he bade Doc good night and went on alone along the old creek trail.

DAL came to a halt to inhale deeply of the fragrance of the newly-cut hay which blended with the sweet perfume of the last of the wild roses.

A family of disturbed green-winged teal flapped at a bend in the creek ahead and a soft evening breeze stirred whispering music through the foliage along the banks.

"The glory of God," Dal breathed softly, as he moved slowly along to his home nestling attractively against its backdrop of tall Douglas spruces and wild fruit underbrush.

The boys, Jim and Ten, had finished the chores. Jim had gone to call on lovely Donna Bruce, south of the creek.

In the house, Mary Baldwin sat at the pedals of a little harmonium which her folks had shipped down to her. Shortly, her sweet voice started an evening hymn, in which young Ten and Dal joined.

Later, Dal told Mary of the plans to interview Miss Eve Bartel, of Cody.

Mary smiled sweetly. "It would be grand for the Deacon if it works out that way. Grand for her, too, Dal, for he's a great man. When do you and Doc leave?"

"Wednesday mornin', hon. Wish us luck all around."

Doc and Baldwin pulled into Cody on Thursday evening in a slanting rain, but before they bedded down for the night, the moon had pushed through the lowered clouds.

"Hope this rain didn't hit the Valley, Doc," Dal said. "It could lay my flax, shell it out."

Doc grunted. He was as concerned as Dal.

The following morning, after breakfast, the Sun Bear Valley settlers had a chat with Marshal Frank Syme, then moved on to the small teacherage.

Though early, a line of washing blew in the sharp breeze.

"Clean, and an early riser, Doc," Baldwin commented.

They stepped to the door and knocked.

Eve Bartel greeted them with a wide smile, displaying rows of white even teeth.

"Morning, gentlemen," she said softly. "I was expecting you. Please come in."

"Thank you, ma'am—Miz Bartel," Dal said.

They entered a neat, two-room frame house.

"Please sit down," Miss Bartel said. "I was just about to have some coffee after my big wash. You'll have a cup

with me?"

"Sure. Thank you, ma'am," Dal answered.

Little Doc had turned to wrap up an unexpired cud of eating tobacco in an old bandana.

Shortly they were talking of their mission. Doc did most of the talking, while Dal appraised Miss Bartel. He liked her. She was good-looking, a comely young woman with mischievous eyes and a head of coppery hair that would go well with the sunsets at the Valley.

Suddenly Dal noticed her mouth tighten as a frown clouded her face.

"Somethin' wrong, ma'am," Dal asked.

She started, her eyes widening. "Well, nothing that I could talk about," she said huskily. She flashed each of them a warm smile.

"I've heard a lot about you Sun Bear Valley folk," Eve Bartel went on. "Marshal Syme has told me so much about you."

"Uh—school's out, Miz Bartel," Dal said. "How would you like to—uh—drive down with Doc and me? You could visit a spell at the Valley. My wife would be happy to have you stay with us."

EVE BARTEL got slowly to her feet and strode to a window.

Doc and Dal exchanged glances as they watched her gaze wistfully into space. They knew that something bothered her—something, or perhaps somebody.

Now she turned.

"Very well," she said lightly. "When would you like me to be ready? I couldn't leave until my wash is dry and ironed." She chuckled softly.

"Could wait over till tomorrow, ma'am," Doc answered. "But if you could make it, we'd rather pull out at about two this afternoon. We'll have to make a one-night camp out, nohow."

"Two o'clock this afternoon, then," Miss Bartel agreed. "That will be perfect."

"Great, ma'am," Dal said. "That should bring us back to the Valley in time for evenin' church. That is, if'n you'd care to go."

"I—I'd love it," the teacher answered.

Doc and Dal shook hands with her. She waved to them from her stoop.

Shortly, they were back at Marshal Syme's office.

"Eve's a grand gal, boys," the marshal said. "But she's a heap worried about this wild ranny Tom Caley."

"You sound real sad about it, Frank," Doc said.

"Yeah, that's right, Doc. I am worried, some. Can't forget Caley killed a man once. It was over Eve, like you know. 'Course, it was in a fight so we couldn't lay a charge of murder against Caley. He had too many witnesses, but —well, there it is."

"Why hasn't Eve married Caley, Frank?" Baldwin asked.

The marshal shrugged. He lit a big cigar and puffed a cloud of smoke up at his office ceiling.

"He's handsome, all right, and has plenty of money," Sym said slowly. "They go out together, look like a well-matched couple, but I don't reckon Eve loves Caley enough. He's too wild. She's got a lot of life, but she's also—ah—gentle."

Dal and Doc exchanged eye signals. It seemed to them that Tom Caley might present quite an obstacle to their hopes, their plans.

"You figure this ramrod would raise old hickory if'n Eve showed any real sign of marryin' up with someone she really loved, huh, marshal?" Doc asked.

"No tellin', Doc. Caley's tough. He has a followin' of tough-ridin' rannies. I'd hate to cross 'em up my ownself. But, what's all this talk about? You're after a school ma'am. Eve's a honey. If she likes Sun Bear Valley and its settlers, you'll be plumb lucky."

Dal got to his feet. "That's a mighty fine recommendation, Frank," he said. "We'll be movin' along now. Got shop-

pin' to do. Make up your mind and pay us a visit soon, huh?"

The big marshal, who was also county sheriff, smiled and nodded.

"Nothin' I'd enjoy more," he said. "Only I hope when I do come down it'll be on a peaceful mission. Seems like I've never visited you yet unless it was to help you git rid of trouble-makers. So long now, and good luck!"

Doc grunted as they strode along the sidewalk.

"You ain't too sure of everythin', are you, Doc," Dal asked softly.

"To tell you the cold truth, Dal, I can't say Frank's talk made me feel any too comfortable. But I reckon we can go ahead with our plan. Git Miz Bartel down for a visit, and then—"

"Yeah, Doc?" Dal prompted, as Doc's voice trailed out.

For once, Doc Carson was stumped. He just shrugged and turned in at the door of the big mercantile store.

They shopped, filling their own requirements and those of neighbors back at the Valley as well.

AT TWO o'clock on the dot, Dal pulled his team up outside the teacherage door.

Eve Bartel was ready. She looked younger, prettier, in a sensible outfit for the road—plaid skirt, cream shirt-waist and a beautifully-beaded soft doeskin jacket.

Dal helped her to the driver's seat, while Doc stowed himself and her bag in back with the supplies.

Eve waved to a number of the Cody citizens, including Marshal Syme, her friends, as they pulled away. And Dal smiled, happy for her.

She chatted brightly along the south trail. Her wide eyes took in every detail of the ruggedly beautiful country. Every now and then she made some comment on it.

"Wait till you see Sun Bear Valley, ma'am," Dal said softly. "You'll never get your eyes right back in their places."

The sun was setting as they reached the river. Just over the bridge, Dal intended to pull in and make camp.

When they rattled across the bridge Dal felt the teacher suddenly clutch his arm. She was staring off right, as Dal turned to her, and her face was suddenly pale. Dal followed her gaze and swallowed sharply as he saw three riders bearing down.

"Tom Caley!" Eve's voice was a small gasp.

Shortly, Caley brought his big black gelding to a skidding halt close to the wagon. His dark eyes flashed.

"Handsome as all get out," Dal thought.

Eve made the introductions.

"Oh. The sod-busters from down Sun Bear way," Caley said.

Dal could hear a light throat sound from Doc in back. He hoped little Doc would keep his mouth buttoned up, though he himself resented the term "sod-busters."

Eve Bartel informed Caley of her plan to visit at Sun Bear Valley a while. "My first real vacation in a long time, Tom," she added.

"You mean you're campin' out with these—nesters tonight?" Caley asked sharply.

"That's the way it's planned, mister," little Doc answered. "Dal and I are both old enough to be Miz Bartel's father. Reckon if she ain't afraid, there's no call for you to sound your mouth."

Murderous lights seemed to flash from Caley's eyes.

"It will be perfectly all right, Tom," Eve said. "I don't think you need to worry at all. Good-by now." She turned to Dal and nodded.

Dal called to his team. He felt a sudden weight bearing down on his consciousness. This man Caley had already tipped his hand. Dal had seen the flame of jealousy, of possessiveness, in the ramrod's eyes.

"Tough hombre, that," Doc grunted.

Dal cast a sly glance at his companion. Her face was drawn, pale, but suddenly she flung back her head as if she had

decided to defy Tom Caley. She turned to Dal.

"Might as well tell you gentlemen that Tom has been pressing me to marry him for some time," she said huskily. "Because I've gone out with him a number of times, because I've rather admired him, he has developed an attitude of complete possessiveness. But I simply couldn't marry him!"

She broke off with a faint shudder that did not escape either Baldwin or Doc.

"Try not to worry, ma'am," Dal said. "If we can help in any way at all, just you don't hesitate to call on us."

"Danged whistlin' right!" Doc added.

Dal pulled the team in and halted them beside a grove of handsome spruces.

Shortly, while Dal fixed up the team, Doc built a fire, then cut spruce boughs to make a bed and shelter for their passenger.

They ate their supper, which Eve Bartel pronounced excellent. She helped Doc wash up the dishes and pans, then Doc handed her his old single action six-gun.

"Just lay it alongside your bed, ma'am," he said, smiling. "You won't need it, but it's always a mite comfortin', in the open like this, to know it's there."

Dal and Doc bade Miss Bartel good night and strode off to make up their own bedground.

THE following bright, dewy morning, Eve Bartel sang lightly as she came to camp from a nearby creek.

"Mm-m-m, but does that sidemeat smell good, Mr. Carson," she said. "It's all simply wonderful." She flung her arms high and inhaled deeply of the fragrance of the wild country.

They ate breakfast, and as the men broke camp, she washed up the dishes.

In the wagon, rattling along the narrowing trail south, Eve Bartel again sang softly.

"Glad you like singin', ma'am," Dal said, when she had quieted. "We do a heap of it down to the Valley."

The sun was lowering, bathing the beautiful Sun Bear Valley in a glorious light of rose and gold, when Dal pulled the team to a halt alongside the pretty little peeled-log schoolhouse.

Eve laid a hand on his arm. Her eyes were wide, her mouth drawn in a soft smile of approval as she stared at the schoolhouse.

Now she turned to view the rolling valley, and let her gaze wander on to the west, to the sunset-splashed wild hills and towering mountains beyond.

"All right, Mr. Baldwin," she said softly. "Drive on now. This is a—a real paradise!"

At the Baldwin yard, Dal sent his son Jim riding off to call in some of the neighbors to the little church. It was not Sunday, but Dal wanted Eve Bartel to meet Deacon Forster at his own place, at his own job.

Mary Baldwin now came hurrying to greet their visitor. Her welcome was warm, wholesome, and tears splashed Eve's face as Mary hugged her.

Later, under a creamy moon, they all strode on to the church. Doc was already there, Dal knew, for the bell clanged its mellow tones of welcome.

Dal and Mary Baldwin watched Deacon Forster's eyes glisten as he stood in his pulpit, smiling down as the settlers filed in, with their visitor.

Now he raised his right arm and gave his opening prayer.

Doc limped up to the platform, his fiddle tucked under his arm. Shortly, to his violin accompaniment, they sang an evening hymn.

Dal glanced at Eve. She was singing softly, her eyes glistening in the lamplight.

Deacon Forster spoke feelingly. He welcomed the visitor to Sun Bear Valley with warmth and sincerity.

Later, as they all strode back to the Baldwin place for supper, little Doc Carson nudged Dal in the ribs with an elbow, his glance moving to Forster and Eve Bartel who were striding slowly

along, far behind the others.

That night, before she retired, Eve Bartel found Dal Baldwin at his horse stable. She laid a hand gently on his arm.

"I—I've decided to take the Sun Bear school, Mr. Baldwin," she said softly. "I think everything, everybody, is just wonderful."

"Thank you, ma'am," Dan answered. "Let's hope we shall make you happy here come school-openin', and—always."

THREE of the Boxed D cowhands had moved their wives and children into residence on their land down at the South Valley, ready for the school opening.

When Eve Bartel opened her school she had seven pupils under the age of nine years.

Dal Baldwin noted the radiant happiness reflected in the new teacher's face as the weeks went by.

She had taught two months when finally one evening she informed Dal and Mary Baldwin of her decision to accept Deacon Forster's proposal of marriage.

Dal started. Twice in the past two months, Tom Caley had come down, leading a spare horse for Eve. They had ridden off together toward the western foothills country.

Dal turned to Eve now.

"Tom Caley know about this?" he asked.

"I've sent word up to Cody," Eve answered. "I—oh, I hope he doesn't make trouble!"

There followed two weeks of hard work for the Sun Bear womenfolk, as they took over to make arrangements for the wedding. Dal Baldwin drove Eve, with Mary, to Cody to shop.

They were nearing Sun Bear Valley on the return trip when suddenly Mary clutched at Dal's arm. She pointed on toward the Carson meadow where volumes of smoke gushed.

"Fire!"

Dal flicked his team with a rein and sent them loping on down.

Doc Carson, Deacon Forster, Tom Bruce and the Morrison's were hard at work in their efforts to save a small haystack. Dal groaned as he glared at the glowing embers of Doc's largest haystack, now burnt to the ground.

Doc whirled to greet Baldwin as the latter pulled up, handed the reins to Mary and jumped to the ground.

"Danged hellion fire-bug jasper done it, Dal!" little Doc roared. "He—"

Doc was cut off by a sharp cry from Mary Baldwin. All the men swung about at the sound.

"My flax!" Dal gasped. "It's—afire!"

Dal started at a lope for the flax field. Deacon Forster and Tom Bruce accompanied him.

Dal groaned as he saw the fire sweeping through the flax stubble, through the tinder dry shocks.

A single figure could be seen flailing at the fire with a gunny sack. This was young Ten Baldwin.

Quickly Dal began to cut willows from a nearby clump. He turned to Mary who had driven up.

"Run the team in and bring wet sacks, hon!" he roared.

Mary spun the horses and sent them at a hard run for the home yard.

Shortly, Dal and his companions had ranged themselves alongside young Ten to flail and batter with their willows.

Dal kicked a flaming shock back onto burnt ground. Forster emulated his act.

Mary, with Eve Bartel, came along with the wet sacks. Dal sent Ten back with his mother to bring up a plow.

Now Eve Bartel seized a sack and ranged herself alongside the Deacon. She flailed vigorously, now and then leaping back as flame from a blazing shock threatened to scorch her lovely hair.

Soon, with Ten driving, Dal was ploughing black furrows away from the creeping blaze which was fanned by a sharpening westerly breeze.

In time they were all rewarded, for the men with the sacks could work

alongside the furrows and so snuff out the fire.

But as he surveyed his loss, more than half his valuable crop, Dal's grimy face was set in a sharp frown. He had received an offer of ten dollars and twenty-cents a bushel for his crop, for shipment east.

Young Ten now sidled up to his father. "I saw two riders around sunset, Dad," Ten said. "One rode a blaze-faced bay—the other, a jet black geldin'."

"Tom!" Eve clutched at Deacon Forster's arm for support as she gasped.

Forster turned to Dal. "I'm sorry, Dal," he said quietly. "Eve has so often warned me that Tom Caley might vent his jealousy in some spiteful fashion. I—"

"Don't you two worry, Deacon," Dal broke in. "You're not responsible. We'll just go right ahead, but from here on in till the weddin' day, and perhaps after, we form a sort of vigilante committee. We stand guard."

"Thanks, neighbor," Forster said. "I think I'll see Eve home now if you don't mind. Count me in on the first sentry shift, huh?"

LITTLE Doc Carson had come limping up with his companions, Jim Baldwin and the Morrisons.

"We got to stand by 'em now more'n ever, Dal," Doc said. "I feel sort of responsible, since it was me that set himself up to play Dan'l Cupid in the pitcher. But from here on in, Cupid packs a gun!" Doc's voice was almost a rattly screech when he had finished his say.

Later, Deacon Forster and Baldwin took their stations for patrol of the area, but no further sign of threat or trouble presented itself throughout the night.

Saturday was the big day, and the little church bell clanged its greeting to the many visitors who came by wagon, afoot and in the saddle.

Marshal Syme and two of his deputies had ridden down. Folk came from as far away as Marquette, Cody and other frontier points.

Forster had called in a brother parson from off a couple hundred miles to the east.

Dal Baldwin had hauled over Mary's little pedal organ for the music, and now Mary sat at her station, softly playing an old hymn as the settlers and visitors filed into the church.

Jud Morrison was going to escort Eve to the altar. Eve had asked Dal Baldwin, but Dal was too nervous about the situation generally. He had a gun stuffed inside his shirt as he entered the church.

He glanced sharply about for sign of Doc, or Marshal Syme and his men, but they were not present as yet.

Mary was playing an arrangement of an old gospel hymn, when suddenly the music was sharply punctuated by the crackle of gunfire.

Dal swiftly slipped out of doors.

The sound of the gunfire came from the direction of the schoolhouse, where the festivities were to be held following the church ceremony.

Quickly Dal whirled, his gun drawn, and peered through ports in a fringe of wolf willow. He sucked in a sharp breath as he saw little Doc Carson creeping from the schoolhouse toward a belt of wild fruit brush. But then he stopped breathing entirely for a moment as he glimpsed, stealing through the brush, off right, ahead, Tom Caley.

Dal pushed on. He swore softly, realizing that Caley was almost at extreme gun range, but now slowly, carefully, he raised his Colt's and took aim.

Caley suddenly set himself, spraddle-legged, and as his gun muzzle thrust forward, Dal squeezed his own trigger.

There was a triple crash of gunfire. Doc and Caley had also shot simultaneously.

Dal saw the big ramrod spin, clutching at his right wrist. A slow smile gathered at Dal's mouth corners. He knew that was the result of his shot, but knew too that Doc would claim it.

Now, gun drawn, Doc was limping toward Caley, as Dal moved up.

"Horn-toad heller!" the little man rasped. "Stand still or next time I'll salivate you for sure and certain!"

Dal stepped in and retrieved Caley's fallen gun. Suddenly he half spun at the sharp crack of gunfire from the schoolhouse.

He saw big Frank Syme step in and drag a man from the building. Then his deputies were in on the show, taking over still another of Caley's gun-happy partners.

Shortly, prodded by Doc's gun muzzle, Caley was hazed along to the marshal-sheriff. Caley's arm was then bandaged by Doc.

Syme instructed his deputies to tie up Caley and his two men and stand guard over them until after the ceremony.

"They tried to break up all the arrangements here, Dal," Syme said gruffly. "We were just in time. Likely they'd have burnt down the schoolhouse, too. Now they'll go up for attempted murder and arson. A hangnoose is what they should get, but you can be sure, they'll get a long stretch."

They strode back to the church, smiling reassuringly, and Deacon Forster met them and squeezed Dal's arm, then patted Doc affectionately on a shoulder.

MARY BALDWIN'S lovely wide eyes questioned Dal. He smiled and nodded. She returned to the organ, and then, lovely as any bride could be, Eve Bartel strode gracefully up the aisle on the arm of old Jud Morrison.

Men and women and young folk listened with bated breath as the stranger preacher performed his ceremony. Marta Carson and others dabbed at their eyes in their great emotion of happiness.

When Deacon escorted his bride into the little annex vestry to sign the register, Mary Baldwin stepped from the organ. Little Doc, carrying his fiddle, joined her.

Dal Baldwin swallowed sharply as he listened to Mary's appropriate wedding solo, to Doc's best, soft accompaniment.

Then Mary returned to the organ, and watching the vestry door, suddenly broke out with the chords of the wedding march. The settlers and visitors rose, and tears splashed down from many an eye.

Proud, head erect, a soft light in his eyes, Deacon beamed on his parishoners and the visitors. Eve Forster almost halted as she neared Dal's pew, her eyes batting sharply as she smiled directly into his eyes—a smile of deep gratitude.

Guns cracked out of doors, where the cowhands of the Boxed D put on their show. They were peaceful guns, firing into the air. Rice and cut paper for confetti showered the bridal couple on their way to the schoolhouse.

Later, the toast, with Marta Carson's raspberry vinegar, was given by Dal Baldwin who spoke with pride of the occasion.

Deacon Forster made adequate reply, then slowly turned to Doc Carson. The parson's smile was very warm, very soft as now he turned to the assembly again.

"My friends and neighbors," he said. "For years before I came, there was a man among us who performed all the spiritual work of this beautiful Valley. I am goin' to ask him now to say a prayer for us all. Doc?"

Doc swallowed sharply. His cheek muscles went into an abrupt little dance in time with his batting eyes as he got a nod from Marta who was silently weeping.

Doc raised his right arm high.

"A'mighty Gawd," he began huskily. "It has pleased Thee again to favor us with Thy great blessin'. Out of the—uh—strife and such, Thou hast give us a great happiness. Bless our newly married couple, and give to them the great happiness they deserve. Amen!"

Within an hour, Doc was playing another role—the role of leader of the two-piece orchestra, as he and Jud Morrison whammed the best out of fiddle and ban-

jo in the opening square dance.

Tom Bruce, on a chair, called the numbers, the changes.

"Y' half right over, half right back,
Do-se-do, and balance all,
Promenade your bride around the hall."

Doc's head was low, his cheek snugged down tightly against his worn old fiddle.

Dal and Mary Baldwin exchanged warm smiles as they passed each other in the grand chain. Dal had taken Marta Carson for his partner, while Marshal Syme partnered Mary.

Then, the change.

"Devil's in the Barley! Smash the window!" Doc set a terrific, foot-tingling pace, and in excellent tempo.

IN TIME the dance was done, and men and women cheered as the Deacon led his bride to the manse, lifted her and carried her over the threshold.

"Chiv-a-ree?" A cowhand called.

But Baldwin shook his head.

"Another time, boys," he said softly. "Let's go along home now. Night, everybody."

As Dal and Mary strode along the creek trail, they came to a halt. Dal turned and swept Mary to him.

Here, several years ago, they had come together to the untrod wilderness—new bride and bridegroom.

So it was this night, with its soft half moon bathing their chosen valley in creamy brilliance, held sweet memories for them.

TRAIL CAMP

(Continued from page 7)

thought they were good ropers, others knew they were not, but the entrance fee made a smaller outlay of money than a season ticket would cost, so there were a great number of mediocre ropers entered in the calf roping just to see the show and be identified with the big rodeo. They so spoiled the act that the management raised the entrance fee to where none but the best would gamble the high entrance fee against the chance of winning.

The purse in saddle bronc riding is $15,-120.00, with an added entrance fee of $30.00. The same size purse obtains for steer wrestling, but the entrance fee in this event is $150.00.

The bull riding purse is $15,120.00, with an entrance fee of $30.00. The purse in the wild horse race is $8,400.00, with an entrance fee of $20.00. There are three cowboys in each team of wild horse race contestants, but only one, the rider, is obliged to pay an entrance fee.

The Madison Square Garden Rodeo has the longest run and the largest total purses of any rodeo in the world and attracts contestants and spectators from many parts of the country.

The two-day Belgrade, Montana, Rodeo packed the stands with spectators both days and was a nice show.

Marvin Holmes won the saddle bronc riding, Bill Linderman was second, Ernest Emory was third and Johnny Reynolds fourth. Abe Graham copped the calf roping, Tom Davis was second, Oral Zumwalt was third and Irven Carlson was fourth.

Bob Olson was best man in the steer wrestling, Bill Lawrence was second, Johnny Reynolds was third, and Erven Wortman was fourth.

Bill Linderman was tops in the bareback bronc riding, Bill Lawrence was second, Bob Duce was third, and fourth was split between Bud Story, Bud Miller, and Bud Jones. Dick Hedderman outrode the field to first prize in the bull riding, Earl Horsford was second, Dick Weining was third, and fourth was split between Buzz Abbott, Bud Miller and Johnny Reynolds.

Tex Smith won the wild cow milking, Tom Davis was second, Bob Rask was third and Earl Stewart was fourth. Jim Carrig was first in the wild horse race, Tom Davis was second, Nate Jackson was third and Bill Sauke fourth.

Rodeo Highlights

Bud Pilcher, Cody, Wyo., rancher and rodeo contestant, defeated Oliver Bakken, also of Cody, in a matched calf roping con-

test arranged at the Cody Stampede Arena as a special entertainment feature for members of the Wyoming Stockgrowers Association, who were holding their annual convention in Cody. Each roper roped five calves. Pilcher's total time was 135.5 seconds and Bakkan's 189.6 seconds.

Winning second in the bareback bronc riding contest, a first and a fourth day money and second in the finals of the saddle bronc riding contest, Buster Ivory, of Modesto, Cal., was awarded the gold and silver belt buckle as a token of his winning the all around championship title of the 33rd Annual Livermore Rodeo.

Casey Tibbs won the saddle bronc riding, Ivory was second, Chuck Sheppard was third and Jack Hara was fourth. Jim Egan copped the bareback bronc riding, Buster Ivory was second, third and fourth were split between Carl Mendes and Casey Tibbs. Clay Carr was best man in the calf roping, Barney Willis was second, Buck Sorrells was third and Leonard Block fourth.

Homer Pettigrew was tops in steer wrestling, Wilbur Plougher was second, Phil Stadtler was third and Claude Henson fourth. John Bowman and Vic Castro won the team roping, Frank Mathis and John Gerig were second. Ray Kohrs and Led Englesman were third and Leonard Block and Louie Coeblo were fourth. Dave Mason won the bull riding, and Rex Taylor and Jim Hart the team roping.

Results at Tulare

Another swell California rodeo was the one staged at Tulare. Ross Dollarhide won the belt buckle emblematic of the all around championship of the show. The stock was furnished by Cuff Burrell and Mac Barbour. Burel Mulkey and Joe Mendes were the judges, Nancy Sheppard and Bernice Dossey were the trick riders. The clowns were Fess Reynolds and Joaquin Sanchez.

There were no finals in the saddle bronc riding, but Ross Dollarhide won first in both day monies, with Claude Morris finishing second in the first go-round. Dick Pascoe was third and Mitch Owens fourth. Morris also finished second in the second go-round with Chuck Sheppard third. Fourth prize was split on the ground (meaning that it was split between the highest point riders who had only been bucked off once in the two go-rounds). [*Turn page*]

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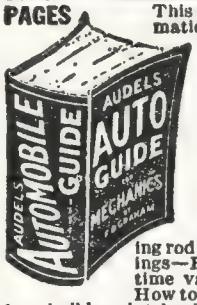

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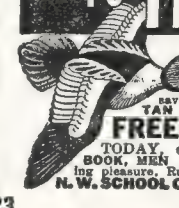

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Lynn Sheppard won the finals of the calf roping, John Dalton was second, Buck Sorrells was third and Barney Willis fourth. There were no finals in the bareback bronc riding. In the first go-round Don Boag was the winner, Chuck Haas was second, Pete Dixon was third, and fourth was split between Chuck O'Kell and Jack Moody. In the second go-round Del Haverty was the winner, Chuck O'Kell was second, Chuck Haas was third and Eddie Rogers fourth.

Bill Hogue took the finals of the steer wrestling, Barney Willis was second, Ross Dollarhide was third, and Phil Stadtler fourth. Hoke Evetts and Joe Costa were the winners in the team roping, Olin Simms and Willie Clay were second, Led Englesman and Bob Jones were third, and Emmett Gil and John Bowman were fourth

There were no finals in the bull riding, Carl Mendes and Loren Fredricks tied for first place in the first go-round, Lucky Buck was third, and fourth was split between Orie Dooley and Dave Mason. In the second go-round Orie Dooley was the winner, Don Bogue was second, Red Mason was third and Carl Mendes fourth.

King City Show

There was plenty of roping at the King City, California Rodeo, there being four events of roping. Calf roping was won by Leonard Block, with Marion Getzweller second, Claude Henson third and John Dalton fourth.

In single steer roping and stopping, Ben Violini was the winner, with Shorty Valdez second, E. V. Dorsey third and Lane Falk fourth. In team steer roping the winners were Olin Simms and Buck Sorrells. Fred Nason and Russ Gomez were second, Shorty Hudson and Jimmie Lyons third, and Ray Thomas and Ben Johnson fourth.

There was also a jackpot team roping contest in which Buck Sorrells and Olin Simms were the winners, with Clay Carr and Vern Castro finishing second, Vic Castro and John Bowman third, and Ki Silacci and Chet Behan fourth.

In the saddle bronc riding contest Bud Linderman was the winner, Buster Ivory was second, Chuck Sheppard was third and Ross Dollarhide and Frank Schneider split fourth. Bud Linderman also won the bareback bronc riding, Jack Moody was second, Frank Finley was third and fourth was split between Gene Rambo, Laurel Ives and Bud Spealman. Loren Fredericks copped the bull riding, Art Cook was second, Don Boag was third and Carl Mendes was fourth.

All-Girl Rodeos

All-Girl rodeos are really getting popular in the southwest, and deservedly so, as they are really thrilling. The all-girl rodeo at Coleman, Texas, drew big crowds and dished out thrills enough to please all. Betty Dusek proved that cowgirls can be skillful with the lariat when she roped and tied three calves in an average time of less than 20 seconds, which is fast enough to win at most any rodeo.

The final results in the calf roping were: First, Betty Dusek; second, Margie Stewart; third, Jackie Worthington; fourth, Margaret Montgomery.

Jackie Worthington copped the bareback bronc riding, Rea Beach was second, Rose Garrett was third and Thena Mae Farr fourth.

Jackie Worthington also won the bull riding finals. Rose Garrett was second, Rae Beach was third and Frances Weeg was fourth. Margaret Montgomery won the finals in the barrel races, Amy McGilvray was second, Janelle McGilvray was third and Jackie Worthington was fourth.

Among the exhibitions there were several girl trick riders including Virginia Reger, Dixie Toalson, Jo Ann Bradley and Betty Lamb, and the show was not without its clowns, Tad Lucas and Dixie Reger donning clown costumes and makeup and looking after the comedy part of the show.

Sterling Club Rodeo

There were so many entries at the recent one-day rodeo of the Sterling Roping Club, at Sterling, Colorado, that many of the contestants had to be drawn out to get the number of entries down to where the performance could be run off in one show.

The results in calf roping were: First, LeRoy Westfall; second, Doc Havely; third, Norman Woodard.

Dick Stull won the steer wrestling, Ike Lamberson was second, Jim Morrow was third and Don Bandy was fourth.

Jim Pope copped the saddle bronc riding, Dale Greenwood was second, Ike Lamberson was third and Bill Howard was fourth. Jim

White was best man in the bareback bronc riding, Bob Pope was second, Dick Stull was third and Roy Givens was fourth. Roy Frank was top man in the bull riding, Don Siminner was second, Tuck Jackson was third and Bill Seeley was fourth.

Canadian Shows

The season's Canadian rodeos opened with the one day rodeo at Keremeos, B. C. Kelsey and Potts were the producers, Howard Peelgreen arena secretary, Arnie Wills and Tom Wood judges.

The winners in saddle bronc riding were: First, Fred Marchana; second, Joe Kelsey; third, Dick Fairchild; fourth, split between George Lowe and Tom Henderson.

Tony Benedictus copped the bareback bronc riding, Russell Scriver was second, Bud Rothrock was third and Bun Anderson fourth. Marion Ives was best man in the calf roping, Barney Allison was second, and third and fourth were split between Tom Wood and Ernie Terbasket. Rudy Ducett was tops in steer wrestling, Tom Henderson was second, Tony Benedictus was third and Marion Ives fourth.

Well, cowhands, that's about all for the Trail Camp this time. *Adios.*

—FOGHORN CLANCY.

IN OUR NEXT ISSUE

PERHAPS troubled by a bad conscience after our unfair treatment of the Indians, we penned them up in reservations—and before adequate legislation was passed, provided them with barely enough food and other necessities to keep some of them alive—those, that is, who didn't die from diseases that they would probably have avoided if they had been given decent living conditions.

Whether it was a bad conscience or a token payment to what little informed and effective public opinion there was in those days, the Indian agents were authorized to buy from ranchers beef which would periodically be turned over to the Indians for their own butchering. Often they were so nearly starved by the time it arrived, that they would fall on it like hungry wolves and devour every morsel of edible flesh.

Whatever the effect on the Indians, and admittedly this system did keep a number of

[*Turn page*]

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them alive, it served as a vehicle for all kinds of skulduggery and double dealing on the part of some agents and ranchers. It was a wide open invitation for men who wanted to enter into deals to give the Indians less than they were supposed to have, sell the rest privately and undercover, and alter their books to suit. There were many ways for a crooked Indian agent to feather his own nest through the beef contracts.

But seldom did they enter into any deal so crude as the one Dave Clagg and Buck Delancey pulled on the Lavafang Reservation with Harvey Wilcoxon of the Lazy W ranch, as well as the Indians, supposed to take the losing end of the deal. But the morally odoriferous pair were not quite as bright as they were bad. They did not figure on Wilcoxon's character and fighting spirit. Nor did they know that Steve Reese, Hank Ball and Dusty Trail would get involved in the fracas.

The progress and outcome of this barefaced steal are presented in BEEF ACROSS THE BORDER, a complete novel by Walker A. Tompkins which will appear in the next issue of RANGE RIDERS WESTERN. Keen Steve, the electronic red-head Dusty Trail, and the volcanic Hank Ball all perform up to their seemingly devil-may-care, but actually well-planned and directed best, under the leadership of the ever-earnest Reese.

However, the best laid plans often get broken, not to mention scrambled, cracked, confused and generally jumbled—all of which is mild compared to what happens to the plans of Steve and his able assistants in BEEF ACROSS THE BORDER. The fact is they almost miss getting into the story at all. But they do—and when they get there the stars of war fall on the rangeland and explode in a meteoric succession of battles and events that will keep you up after supper on the day you get the next RANGE RIDERS WESTERN. If you think it is impossible to pack more excitement into one novel than there is in this issue's, just get hold of the next Steve Reese novel—in our next issue!

The Rio Grande

Whether time flows on and carries people relentlessly with it or time stands still and people advance past it more or less of their own volition is a matter that we won't attempt to settle here—but that all rivers flow inevitably to the sea, and in their flowing

make history is a matter beyond any but quibbling cavil. And the Rio Grande, conveniently placed so that it precisely coincides with the dividing line between Mexico and the United States, has made more history than most.

That is for thirteen hundred miles. The other eleven hundred is in New Mexico and Colorado. From a height of twelve thousand feet in the Colorado Rockies, through mighty canyons, the deepest of which—seventeen hundred and fifty feet—in the big bend country, through plains and fertile valleys and badlands, till it empties out of the semi-tropical delta into the gulf of Mexico, there is hardly a mile that does not carry the record of some event of romance or adventure, of battle or banditry, that is not part and parcel of the history of the country.

In the midst of a perilous criminal situation on the Border, Ranger Sergeant Bixby was busier than a one-armed paper hanger trying to keep his outlaws sorted out under the eye of a Ranger Inspector who was more meticulous about rules and regulations and legal technicalities concerning the proper etiquette between policemen of the different countries than a chief of protocol at an international banquet of state.

Nevertheless, and in spite of the pranks and assorted misbehavior of one "Rio" Hopper, horsethief and jack of all criminal trades, including the gentle art of Border jumping, Sergeant Bixby and his very young assistant Jack Conway manage to kick up considerable dust that not only confuses the inspector, but ends up with vastly improved relations all around.

This is all told in a realistic little bit of Southwestern color and action by that veteran Texan writer, Barry Scobee. The name of the story is RIVER TROUBLE, and it will take you right down to both sides of the Rio almost as completely as though you will have been bodily transported. This is a Texas Ranger story from the top of the pile!

And in addition to the Scobee story and the Steve Reese novel, there will be the reg-

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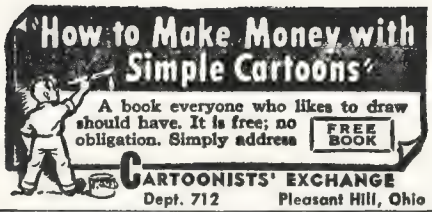
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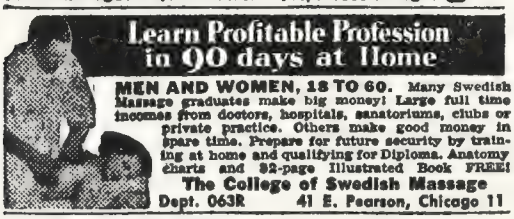
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LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

OUR Western superstitions department is turning up interesting comment like fish worms in a barnyard after a rain. We are particularly glad to get letters like the following from a real rancher—J. M. Sterling. Perhaps the reason we like the letter so much is partly influenced by the fact that it corresponds with our own feelings and experience. However that may be, we like it. What do you feel? Let's have more letters about the genuine character of the cowboy.

I like your department for exploding and rectifying the many prevalent misconceptions and superstitions that appear in Western fiction. One of these that annoys me plenty is the general handling of the cowboys' character so that a reader who knew nothing about it would think that they were mostly drunks, who at the first moment they were relieved from work headed straight for the nearest bar.

I was raised on a Texas cow ranch and have been in cow business all my life. Went up the trail in the eighties and worked all over cow-country from Chihuahua to Calgary, not to mention up and down California and Oregon from Bakersville up to the country around Bend and north to the John Day Country on the Columbia. Later owned my own outfit for a while.

Having lived with 'em all my life, I can say that there are as many different kinds of men in cow business as you'll find in any other. I suppose a bigger variety, because there have always been many that were in it just for the adventure of the thing. Plenty of them were hard-working, sober, thrifty, industrious and intelligent, and were working up to own their own outfits. On the average they were as wholesome a bunch as you'd find in a college. As in every game there were a normal number of no-goods, but the same as anywhere else, they didn't last long, usually not being up to the hard work and ability to endure hardship and danger that was required. To be worth anything a cowhand had to have many skills, plenty of savvy; he had to have a pretty even disposition to get along well with stock, and lots of courage that would be tested by bad horses, bad cattle, or bad country and weather almost every day.

This would be a better world today if there were more people like the old-time cowhand.—*J. M. Sterling, Spokane, Washington.*

Thanks, Mr. Sterling. Who's going to be

the expert Westerner in next issue? Don't be bashful, folks. Let's have your gripes. We want the straight dope about Western history, detail and character. Let's have letters from all sections of cow-country.

Thanks for MASSACRE MESA—one of the best yet. I am a regular reader of RANGE RIDERS WESTERN, and this novel rates right out among the leaders. I always like stories that have railroading mixed into them. There was something romantic to me about those old funnel-stacked, wood-burning engines and pretty, if not too comfortable, passenger cars that were celebrated in the Currier and Ives prints. Maybe those days had their bad angles, but there was something about having to do for yourself that had its advantages. When a man had to get up his own wood, feed wood stoves and fireplaces, kill his own meat, build his own buildings, and raise much of his own food, people had skills, were always busy, always interested. In those days you might find some discontented people, but you seldom found anyone who was bored as you do today. People didn't have time to be bored, and they got lots of satisfaction out of developing the many skills that they had to develop for their own survival.

Pardon me for going on like this, but that wonderful novel MASSACRE MESA by Walker A. Tompkins in the last RANGE RIDERS WESTERN got me to thinking. Keep up the good work, and you'll have a reader in me till the last loop is tossed.—*Bill Thompson, Millinocket, Maine.*

You're right, Bill, and it is this love of a life that kept a man active and doing things, instead of worrying and performing one limited job, that makes Western magazines popular. Anyway, that's one of the elements.

Let me say, sir, that in the last issue of RANGE RIDERS WESTERN you have a bunch of writers that can't be beaten, not only for interesting stories, but for knowledge of the country and activities they are writing about. Any Westerner can tell that men like Tompkins, Bond, Cruickshank, Martin and Richardson have actually lived—maybe they still do—on ranches. This true flavor and correct detail mean a lot to this Westerner. When I want a good Western magazine I know I can't go wrong with any of the THRILLING PUBLICATIONS.—*Alice M. Lardner, Dubuque, Iowa.*

We'll try to keep it that way, Miss Lardner. Thanks again for your good letters, folks. We're always glad to hear from you, anything about the magazine or the West is grist to our type-mill. Address all letters or postcards, which are equally appreciated, to RANGE RIDERS WESTERN, 10 E. 40th St., New York 16, N. Y. So long until next issue.

—THE EDITOR.

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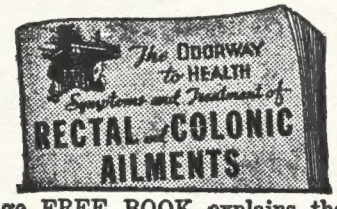

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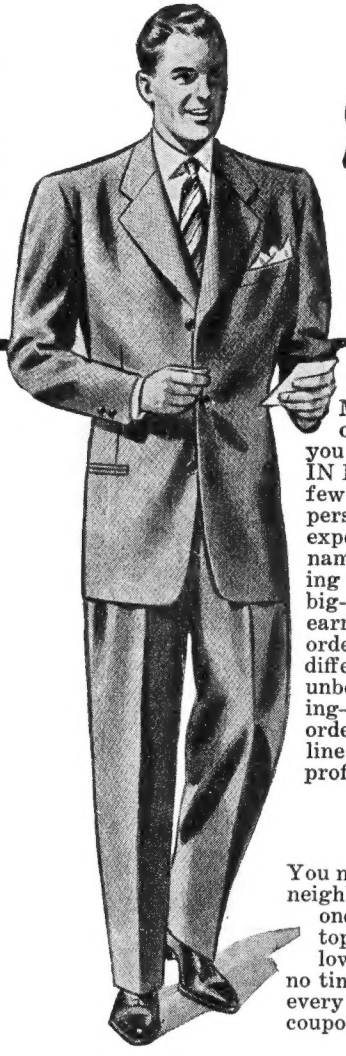

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